Cleon the Emperor

Isaac Asimov

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Isaac Asimov
  -
  -
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
  - 6.
  - 7.
  - 8.
  - 9.
  - 10.
  - 11.
  - 12.
  - 13.
  - 14.
  - 15.
  - 16.
  - 17.
  - 18.
  - 19.
  - 20.
  - 21.
  - 22.
  - 23.
  - 24.
  - 25.

Isaac Asimov

Cleon the Emperor

First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, April 1992

Locus Award Nominee

CLEON I-…Though he often received panegyrics for being the last Emperor under whom the First Galactic Empire was reasonably united and reasonably prosperous, the quarter-century reign of Cleon I was one of continuous decline. This cannot be viewed as his direct responsibility, for the Decline of Empire was based on political and economic factors too strong for anyone to deal with at the time. He was fortunate in his First Ministers-Eto Demerzel and, then, Hari Seldon, in whose development of Psychohistory the Emperor never lost faith. Cleon and Seldon, as the objects of the final Joranumite conspiracy, with its bizarre climax-

Encyclopedia Galactica

All quotations from the Encyclopedia Galactica here reproduced are taken from the 116th Edition, published 1020 F.E. by the Encyclopedia Galactica Publishing Co., Terminus, with the permission of the publishers.

1.

Mandell Gruber was a happy man. He seemed so to Hari Seldon, certainly. Seldon stopped his morning constitutional to watch him.

Gruber, perhaps in his late forties, a few years younger than Seldon, was a bit gnarled from his continuing work on the Imperial Palace grounds, but he had a cheerful, smoothly shaven face, topped by a pink skull, not much of which was hidden by his thin, sandy hair. He whistled softly to himself as he inspected the leaves of the bushes for any signs of insect infestation beyond the ordinary.

He was not the Chief Gardener, of course. The Chief Gardener of the Imperial Palace Grounds was a high functionary who had a palatial office in one of the buildings of the enormous Imperial complex, with an army of men and women under him. The chances are he did not step out onto the grounds oftener than once or twice a year.

Gruber was one of the army. His title, Seldon knew, was Gardener First-Class, and it had been well-earned, with nearly thirty years of faithful service.

Seldon called to him as he paused on the perfectly level crushed gravel walk. “Another marvelous day, Gruber.”

Gruber looked up and his eyes twinkled. “Yes, indeed, First Minister, and it's sorry I am for those cooped-up indoors.”

“You mean as I am about to be.”

“There's not much about you, First Minister, for people to sorrow over, but if you're disappearing into those buildings on a day like this, it's a bit of sorrow that we fortunate few can feel for you.”

“I thank you for your sympathy, Gruber, but you know we have forty billion Trantorians under the dome. Are you sorry for all of them?”

“Indeed, I am. I am grateful I am not of Trantorian extraction myself so that I could qualify as gardener. There be few of us on this world that work in the open, but here I be, one of the fortunate few.”

“The weather isn't always this ideal.”

“That is true. And I have been out here in the sluicing rains and the whistling winds. Still, as long as you dress fittingly… Look,” and Gruber spread his arms open, wide as his smile, as if to embrace the vast expanse of the Palace grounds. “I have my friends, the trees and the lawns and all the animal life-forms to keep me company, and growth to encourage in geometric form, even in the winter. Have you ever *seen* the geometry of the grounds, First Minister?”

“I am looking at it right now, am I not?”

“I mean the plans spread out so you can really appreciate it all,

and marvelous it is, too. It was planned by Tapper Savand, over three hundred years ago, and it has been little changed since. Tapper was a great horticulturist, the greatest-and he came from my planet."

"That was Anacreon, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. A far-off world near the edge of the galaxy, where there is still wilderness and life can be sweet. I came here when I was still an ear-wet lad, when the present Chief Gardener took power under the old Emperor. Of course, now they're talking of re-designing the grounds." Gruber sighed deeply and shook his head. "That would be a mistake. They are just right as they are now, properly proportioned, well-balanced, pleasing to the eye and spirit. But it is true that in history, the grounds have occasionally been re-designed. Emperors grow tired of the old, and are always seeking the new, as if new is somehow always better. Our present Emperor, may he live long, has been planning re-design with the Chief Gardener. At least that is the word that runs from gardener to gardener." This last he added quickly, as if abashed at spreading Palace gossip.

"It might not happen soon."

"I hope not, First Minister. Please, if you have the chance to take some time from all the heart-stopping work you must be after doing, study the design of the grounds. It is a rare beauty and, if I had my way, there should not be a leaf moved out of place, nor a flower, nor a rabbit, anywhere in all these hundreds of square kilometers.'

Seldon smiled. "You are a dedicated man, Gruber. I would not be surprised if someday you were Chief Gardener."

"May Fate protect me from that. The Chief Gardener breathes no fresh air, sees no natural sights, and forgets all he has learned of nature. He lives there," Gruber pointed, scornfully, "and I think he no longer knows a bush from a stream unless one of his underlings leads him out and places his hand on one or dips it into the other."

For a moment, it seemed as though Gruber would expectorate his scorn, but he could not find any place on which he could bear to spit.

Seldon laughed quietly. "Gruber, it's good to talk to you. When I am overcome with the duties of the day, it is pleasant to take a few moments to listen to your philosophy of life."

"Ah, First Minister, it is no philosopher I am. My schooling was very sketchy."

"You don't need schooling to be a philosopher. Just an active mind and experience with life. Take care, Gruber. I have the temptation to see you promoted."

"If you but leave me as I am, First Minister, you will have my total gratitude."

Seldon was smiling as he passed on, but the smile faded as his mind turned once more to his current problems. Ten years as First

Minister-and if Gruber knew how heartily sick Seldon was of his position, his sympathy would rise to enormous heights. Could Gruber grasp the fact that Seldon's progress in the techniques of Psychohistory showed promise of facing him with an unbearable dilemma?

2.

Seldon's thoughtful stroll across the grounds was the epitome of peace. It was hard to believe, here in the midst of the Emperor's immediate domain, that he was on a world that except for this area was totally enclosed by a dome. Here, in this spot, he might be on his home world of Helicon, or Gruber's world of Anacreon.

Of course, the sense of peace was an illusion. The grounds were guarded-thick with security.

Once, a thousand years ago, the Imperial Palace grounds, much less palatial, much less differentiated from a world only beginning to construct domes over individual regions, had been open to all citizens and the Emperor himself could walk along the paths, unguarded, nodding his head in greeting to his subjects.

No more. Now security was in place and no one from Trantor itself could possibly invade the grounds. That did not remove the danger, however, for that, when it came, came from discontented Imperial functionaries and from corrupt and suborned soldiers. It was *within* the grounds that the Emperor and his ministers were most in danger. What would have happened if on that occasion, nearly ten years before, Seldon had not been accompanied by Dors Venabili?

It had been in his first year as First Minister and it was only natural, he supposed (after the fact), that there would be heart-burning over his unexpected choice for the post. Many others, far better qualified in training, in years of service, and, most of all, in their own eyes, could view the appointment with anger. They did not know of Psychohistory or of the importance the Emperor attached to it, and the easiest way to correct the situation was to corrupt one of the sworn protectors of the First Minister.

Venabili must have been more suspicious than Seldon himself was. Or else, with Demerzel's disappearance from the scene, her instructions to guard Seldon had been strengthened. The truth was that, for the first few years of his First Ministership, she was at his side more often than not.

And on the late afternoon of a warm, sunny day, Venabili noted the glint of the westering sun-a sun never seen under Trantor's dome-on the metal of a blaster.

“Down, Hari!” she cried suddenly, and her legs devoured the grass as she raced toward the sergeant.

“Give me that blaster, sergeant,” she said tightly.

The would-be assassin, momentarily immobilized by the unexpected sight of a woman running toward him, now reacted quickly, raising the drawn blaster.

But she was already at him, her hand enclosing his right wrist in a steely grip and lifting his arm high. “Drop it,” she said through clenched teeth.

The sergeant's face twisted as he attempted to yank loose his arm.

“Don't try, sergeant,” said Venabili. “My knee is three inches from your groin, and, if you so much as blink, your genital equipment will be history. So just freeze. That's right. Okay, now open your hand. If you don't drop the blaster right *now* I will break your arm.”

A gardener came running up with a rake. Venabili motioned him away. The blaster dropped.

Seldon had arrived. “I'll take over, Dors.”

“You will *not*. Get in among those trees, and take the blaster with you. Others may be involved, and ready.”

Venabili had not loosed her grip on the sergeant. She said, “Now, sergeant, I want the name of whoever it was who persuaded you to make an attempt on the First Minister's life, and the name of everyone else who is in this with you.”

The sergeant was silent.

“Don't be foolish,” said Venabili. “Speak!” She twisted his arm and he sunk to his knees. She put her shoe on his neck. “If you think silence becomes you, I can crush your larynx and you will be silent forever. And even before that I am going to damage you *badly*-I won't leave one bone unbroken. You had better talk.”

The sergeant talked.

Later, Seldon had said to her, “How could you do that, Dors? I never believed you capable of such, such… *violence*.”

Venabili said coolly, “I did not actually hurt him much, Hari. The threat was sufficient. In any case, your safety was paramount.”

“You should have let me take care of him.”

“Why? To salvage your masculine pride? You wouldn't have been fast enough, for one thing, not at fifty. Secondly, no matter what you would have succeeded in doing, you were a man and it would have been expected. I am a woman and women, in popular thought, are not considered as ferocious as men, and most, in general, do not have the strength to do what I did. The story will improve in the telling and everyone will be terrified of me. No one will dare to try to harm you for fear of me.”

“For fear of you and for fear of execution. The sergeant and his cohorts are to be killed, you know.”

At this, an anguished look clouded Dors's usually composed visage, as if she could not stand the thought of the traitorous sergeant being put to death even though he would have cut down her beloved Hari without a second thought.

“But,” she exclaimed, “there is no need to execute the

conspirators. Exile will do the job."

"No, it won't," said Seldon. "It's too late. Cleon will hear of nothing but executions. I can quote him, if you wish."

"You mean he's already made up his mind?"

"At once. I told him that exile or imprisonment would be all that was necessary, but he said, 'No.' He said, 'Every time I try to solve a problem by direct and forceful action, first Demerzel and then you talk of despotism and tyranny. But this is *my* palace. These are *my* grounds. These are *my* guards. My safety depends on the security of this place and the loyalty of my people. Do you think that any deviation from absolute loyalty can be met with anything but instant death? How else would you be safe? How else would I be safe?'

"I said there would have to be a trial. 'Of course,' he said, 'a short military trial, and I don't expect a single vote for anything but execution. I shall make that quite clear.'"

Venabili looked appalled. "You're taking this very quietly. Do you agree with the Emperor?"

Reluctantly, Seldon nodded. "I do."

"Because there was an attempt on *your* life. Have you abandoned principle for revenge?"

"Now, Dors. I'm not a vengeful person. However, it was not myself alone that was at risk, far less the Emperor-if there is anything that the recent history of the Empire shows us, it is that Emperors come and go. It is Psychohistory that must be protected. Undoubtedly, even if something happens to me, Psychohistory will someday be developed, but the Empire is falling fast, and we cannot wait, and only I have advanced far enough to obtain the necessary techniques in time."

"You should perhaps teach what you know to others, then?" said Venabili gravely.

"I'm doing so. Yugo Amaryl would be a reasonable successor, and I have gathered a group of technicians who will someday be useful, but-they won't be as-" he paused.

"They won't be as good as you, as wise, as capable? Really?"

"I happen to think so," said Seldon. "And I happen to be human. Psychohistory is mine and, if I can possibly manage it, I want the credit."

"Human," sighed Venabili, shaking her head, almost sadly.

The executions went through. No such purge had been seen in over a century. Two Senior Councillors met their deaths, five officials of lower ranks, four soldiers, including the hapless sergeant. Every guard who could not withstand the most rigorous investigation was relieved of duty and sent to detachments on the Outer Worlds.

Since then, there had been no whisper of disloyalty and so

notorious had become the care with which the First Minister was guarded, to say nothing of the terrifying woman who watched over him, that it was no longer necessary for Dors to accompany him everywhere. Her invisible presence was an adequate shield, and the Emperor Cleon enjoyed nearly ten years of quiet, and of absolute security.

Now, however, Psychohistory was finally reaching the point where predictions of a sort could be made, and, as Seldon crossed the grounds in his passage from his office (First Minister) to his laboratory (Psychohistorian), he was uneasily aware of the likelihood that this era of peace might be coming to an end.

3.

Yet even so, Hari Seldon could not repress the surge of satisfaction that he felt as he entered his laboratory.

How things had changed.

It had begun eighteen years earlier with his own doodlings on his second-rate Heliconian computer. It was then that the first hint of what was to become para-chaotic math came to him in cloudy fashion.

Then there were the years at Streeling University when he and Yugo Amaryl, working together, attempted to renormalize the equations, get rid of the inconvenient infinities, and find a way around the worst of the chaotic effects. They made very little progress indeed.

But now, after ten years as First Minister, he had a whole floor of the latest computers and a whole staff of people working on a large variety of problems.

Of necessity, none of his staff, except for Yugo and himself, of course, could really know much more than the immediate problem they were dealing with. Each of them worked with only a small ravine or outcropping on the gigantic mountain range of Psychohistory that only Seldon and Amaryl could see as a mountain range-and even they could see it only dimly, its peaks hidden in clouds, its slopes in mist.

Dors Venabili was right, of course. He would have to begin initiating his people into the entire mystery. The technique was getting well beyond what two men alone could handle. And Seldon was aging. Even if he could look forward to some additional decades, the years of his most fruitful breakthroughs were surely behind him.

Even Amaryl would be thirty-nine within a month and though that was still young, it was perhaps not overyoung for a mathematician, and he had been working on the problem almost as long as Seldon himself. His capacity for new and tangential thinking might be dwindling, too.

Amaryl had seen him enter and was now approaching. Seldon watched him fondly. Amaryl was as much a Dahlite as Seldon's foster-son, Raych, was, and yet Amaryl was not Dahlite at all. He lacked the mustache, he lacked the accent, he lacked, it would seem, any Dahlite consciousness. He had even been impervious to the lure of Jojo Joranum, who had appealed so thoroughly to the people of Dahl.

It was as though Amaryl recognized no sectional patriotism, no planetary patriotism, not even Imperial patriotism. He belonged, completely and entirely, to Psychohistory.

Seldon felt a twinge of insufficiency. He, himself, remained conscious of his first three decades on Helicon and there was no way he could keep from thinking of himself as a Heliconian. He wondered

if that consciousness was not sure to betray him by causing him to skew his thinking about Psychohistory. Ideally, to use Psychohistory properly, one should be above sectors and worlds and deal only with humanity in the faceless abstract, and this was what Amaryl did.

And Seldon didn't, he admitted to himself, sighing silently.

Amaryl said, “We *are* making progress, Hari, I suppose.”

“You suppose, Yugo? Merely suppose?”

“I don't want to jump into outer space without a suit.” He said this quite seriously (he did not have much of a sense of humor, Seldon knew) and they moved into their private office. It was small, but it was also well-shielded.

Amaryl sat down and crossed his legs. He said, “Your latest scheme for getting around chaos may be working in part-at the cost of sharpness, of course.”

“Of course. What we gain in the straightaway, we lose in the roundabouts. That's the way the universe works. We've just got to fool it somehow.”

“We've fooled it a little bit. It's like looking through frosted glass.”

“Better than the years we spent trying to look through lead.”

Amaryl muttered something to himself, then said, “We can catch glimmers of light and dark.”

“Explain!”

“I can't, but I have the Prime Radiant, which I've been working on like a-a-”

“Try lamec. That's an animal-a beast of burden-we have on Helicon. It doesn't exist on Trantor.”

“If the lamec works hard, then that is what my work on the Prime Radiant has been like.”

Amaryl pressed the security key pad on his desk, and a drawer unsealed and slid open noiselessly.

He took out a dark, opaque cylinder which Seldon scrutinized with interest. Seldon himself had worked out the Prime Radiant's circuitry, but Amaryl had put it together-a clever man with his hands was Amaryl.

The room darkened and equations and relationships shimmered in the air. Numbers spread out beneath them, hovering just above the desk surface, as if suspended by invisible marionette strings.

Seldon said, “Wonderful. Some day, if we live long enough, we'll have the Prime Radiant produce a river of mathematical symbolism that will chart past and future history. In it we can find currents and rivulets and work out ways of changing them in order to make them follow other currents and rivulets that we would prefer.”

“Yes,” said Amaryl dryly, “if we can manage to live with the knowledge that the actions we take, which we will mean for the best,

may turn out to be for the worst."

"Believe me, Yugo, I never go to bed at night without that particular thought gnawing at me. Still, we haven't come to it yet. All we have is this-which, as you say, is no more than seeing light and dark fuzzily through frosted glass."

"True enough."

"And what is it you think you see, Yugo?" Seldon watched Amaryl closely, a little grimly. He was gaining weight, getting just a bit pudgy. He spent too much time bent over the computers (and now over the Prime Radiant), and not enough in physical activity. And, though he saw a woman now and then, Seldon knew, he had never married. A mistake! Even a workaholic is forced to take time off to satisfy a mate, to take care of the needs of the children.

Seldon thought of his own still-trim figure and of the manner in which Dors strove to make him keep it that way.

Amaryl said, "What do I see? The Empire is in trouble."

"The Empire is always in trouble."

"Yes, but it's more specific. There's a possibility that we may have trouble at the center."

"At Trantor?"

"I presume. Or at the Periphery. Either there will be a bad situation here, perhaps civil war, or the outlying provinces will begin to break away."

"Surely it doesn't take Psychohistory to point out these possibilities."

"The interesting thing is that there seems a mutual exclusivity. One or the other. The likelihood of both together is very small. Here! Look! It's your own mathematics. Observe!"

They bent over the Prime Radiant display for a long time.

Seldon said finally, "I fail to see *why* the two should be mutually exclusive."

"So do I, Hari, but where's the value of Psychohistory if it shows us only what we would see anyway? This is showing us something we *wouldn't* see. What it doesn't show us is, first, which alternative is better, and second, what to do to make the better come to pass and depress the possibility of the worse."

Seldon pursed his lips, then said slowly, "I can tell you which alternative is preferable. Let the Periphery go and keep Trantor."

"Really?"

"No question. We must keep Trantor stable if for no other reason than that we're here."

"Surely our own comfort isn't the decisive point."

"No, but Psychohistory is. What good will it do us to keep the Periphery intact, if conditions on Trantor force us to stop work on

Psychohistory? I don't say that we'll be killed, but we may be unable to work. The development of Psychohistory is on what our fate will depend. As for the Empire, if the Periphery secedes it will only begin a disintegration that may take a long time to reach the core."

"Even if you're right, Hari, what do we do to keep Trantor stable?"

"To begin with, we have to think about it."

A silence fell between them, and then Seldon said, "Thinking doesn't make me happy. What if the Empire is altogether on the wrong track, and has been for all its history? I think of that every time I talk to Gruber."

"Who's Gruber?"

"Mandell Gruber. A gardener."

"Oh. The one who came running up with the rake to rescue you at the time of the assassination attempt."

"Yes. I've always been grateful to him for that. He had only a rake against possibly other conspirators with blasters. That's loyalty. Anyhow, talking to him is like a breath of cool wind. I can't spend all my time talking to court officials and to Psychohistorians."

"Thank you."

"Come! You know what I mean. Gruber likes the open. He wants the wind and the rain and the biting cold and everything else that raw weather can bring to him. I miss it myself sometimes."

"I don't. I wouldn't care if I never went out there."

"You were brought up under the dome-but suppose the Empire consisted of simple unindustrialized worlds, living by herding and farming, with thin populations and empty spaces. Wouldn't we all be better off?"

"It sounds horrible to me."

"I found some spare time to check it as best I could. It seems to me it's a case of unstable equilibrium. A thinly populated world of the type I describe either grows moribund and impoverished, falling off into an uncultured near-animal level; or it industrializes. It is standing on a narrow point and falls over in either direction, and, as it happens, almost every world in the galaxy has fallen over into industrialization."

"Because that's better."

"Maybe. But it can't continue forever. We're watching the results of the over-toppling now. The Empire cannot exist for much longer because it has-it has overheated. I can't think of any other expression. What will follow we don't know. If, through Psychohistory, we manage to prevent the fall or, more likely, force a recovery after the fall, is that merely to insure another period of overheating? Is that the only future humanity has, to push the boulder, like Sisyphus, up to the

top of a hill only in order to see it roll to the bottom again?"

"Who's Sisyphus?"

"A character in a primitive myth. Amaryl, you must do more reading."

Amaryl shrugged. "So I can learn about Sisyphus? Not important. Perhaps Psychohistory will show us a path to an entirely new society, one altogether different from anything we have seen, one that would be stable and desirable."

"I hope so," sighed Seldon. "I hope so, but there's no sign of it yet. For the near future, we will just have to labor to let the Periphery go. That will mark the beginning of the Fall of the Galactic Empire."

4.

"And so I said," said Hari Seldon. "That will mark the beginning of the Fall of the Galactic Empire. And so it will, Dors."

Dors listened, tight-lipped. She accepted Seldon's First Ministership as she accepted everything-calmly. Her only mission was to protect him and his Psychohistory, but that task, she well knew, was made harder by his position. The best security was to go unnoticed and as long as the sun of office shone down upon Seldon, not all the physical barriers in existence would be satisfactory, or sufficient.

The luxury in which they now lived; the careful shielding from spy-beams, as well as from physical interference; the advantages to her own historical research of being able to make use of nearly unlimited funds, did not satisfy her. She would gladly have exchanged it all for their old quarters at Streeling University. Or better yet, for a nameless apartment in a nameless sector where no one knew them.

"That's all very well, Hari dear," she said, "but it's not enough."

"What's not enough?"

"The information you're giving me. You say we might lose the Periphery. How? Why?"

Seldon smiled briefly. "How nice it would be to know, Dors, but Psychohistory is not yet at the stage where it could tell us."

"In your opinion, then. Is it the ambition of local, faraway governors to declare themselves independent?"

"That's a factor, certainly. It's happened in past history, as you know better than I, but never for long. Maybe this time, it will be permanent."

"Because the Empire is weaker?"

"Yes, because trade flows less freely than it once did, because communications are stiffer than they once were, because the governors in the Periphery are, in actual fact, closer to independence than they have ever been. If one of them arises with particular ambitions-"

"Can you tell which one it might be?"

"Not in the least. All we can force out of Psychohistory at this stage is the definite knowledge that *if* a governor of unusual ability and ambition arises, he would find conditions more suitable for his purposes than he would have in the past. It could be other things, too, some great natural disaster, or sudden civil war between two distant world coalitions. None of that can be precisely predicted as of now, but we can tell that anything of the sort that happens will have more serious consequences than it would have had a century ago."

“But if you don't know a little more precisely what will happen in the Periphery, how can you so guide actions as to make sure the Periphery goes, rather than Trantor?”

“By keeping a close eye on both and trying to stabilize Trantor and *not* trying to stabilize the Periphery. We can't expect Psychohistory to order events automatically without much greater knowledge of its workings, so we have to make use of constant manual controls, so to speak. In days to come, the technique will be refined and the need for manual control will decrease.”

“But that,” said Dors, “is in days to come. Right?”

“Right. And even that is only a hope.”

“And just what kind of instabilities threaten Trantor, if we hang on to the Periphery?”

“The same possibilities-economic and social factors, natural disasters, ambitious rivalries among high officials. And something more. I have described the Empire to Yugo as being overheated-and Trantor is the most overheated portion of all. It seems to be breaking down. The infrastructure-water supply, heating, waste disposal, fuel lines, everything-seems to be having unusual problems, and that's something I've been turning my attention to more and more lately.”

“What about the death of the Emperor?”

Seldon spread his hands. “That happens inevitably, but Cleon is in good health. He's only my age, which I wish was younger, but isn't too old. His two sons are totally inadequate for the succession but there will be enough claimants. More than enough to cause trouble and make his death distressing, but it might not prove a total catastrophe-in the historic sense.”

“Let's say his assassination, then.”

Seldon looked up nervously. “Don't say that. Even if we're shielded, don't use the word.”

“Hari, don't be foolish. It's an eventuality that must be reckoned with. There was a time when the Joranumites might have taken power and, if they had, the Emperor, one way or another-”

“Probably not. He would have been more useful as a figurehead. And in any case, forget it. Joranum died last year in Nishaya, a rather pathetic figure.”

“He had followers.”

“Of course. Everyone has followers. Did you ever come across the Globalist party on my native world of Helicon in your studies of the early history of the Empire and of the Kingdom of Trantor?”

“No, I haven't. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Hari, but I don't recall coming across any piece of history in which Helicon played a role.”

“I'm not hurt, Dors. Happy the world without a history, I always

say. -In any case, about twenty-four hundred years ago, there arose a group of people on Helicon who were quite convinced that Helicon was the only inhabited globe in the universe. Helicon *was* the universe and beyond it there was only a solid sphere of sky speckled with tiny stars."

"How could they believe that?" said Dors. "They were part of the Empire, I presume."

"Yes, but Globalists insisted that all evidence to the effect that the Empire existed was either illusion or deliberate deceit; that Imperial emissaries and officials were Heliconians playing a part for some reason. They were absolutely immune to reason."

"And what happened?"

"I suppose it's always pleasant to think that your particular world is *the* world. At their peak, the Globalists may have persuaded ten percent of the population of the planet to be part of the movement. Only ten percent, but they were a vehement minority that drowned out the indifferent majority and threatened to take over."

"But they didn't, did they?"

"No, they didn't. What happened was that Globalism caused a diminishing of Imperial trade and the Heliconian economy slid into the doldrums. When the belief began to affect the pocketbook of the population, it lost popularity rapidly. The rise and fall puzzled many at the time, but Psychohistory, I'm sure, would have shown it to be inevitable and would have made it unnecessary to give it any thought."

"I see. But, Hari, what is the point of this story? I presume there's some connection with what we were discussing."

"The connection is that such movements never completely die, no matter how ridiculous their tenets may seem to sane people. Right now, on Helicon, *right now* there are still Globalists. Not many, but every once in a while seventy or eighty of them get together in what they call a Global Congress and take enormous pleasure in talking to each other about Globalism. -Well, it is only ten years since the Joranumite movement seemed such a terrible threat on this world, and it would not be at all surprising if there weren't still some remnants left. There may still be some remnants a thousand years from now."

"Isn't it possible that a remnant may be dangerous?"

"I doubt it. It was JoJo's charisma that made it dangerous and he's dead. He didn't even die a heroic death or one that was in any way remarkable; just withered away and died in exile, a broken man."

Dors stood up and walked the length of the room quickly, her arms swinging at her sides and her fists clenching. She returned and stood before the seated Seldon.

“Hari,” she said, “let me speak my mind. If Psychohistory points to the possibility of serious disturbances on Trantor then, if there are Joranumites still left, they may still be aiming for the death of the Emperor.”

Seldon laughed nervously. “You jump at shadows, Dors. Relax.”

But he found that he could not dismiss what she had said quite that easily.

5.

The Sector of Wye had a tradition of opposition to the Entun Dynasty of Cleon I that had been ruling the Empire for over two centuries. The opposition dated back to a time when the line of Mayors of Wye had contributed members who had served as Emperor. The Wyan dynasty had neither lasted long nor had it been conspicuously successful, but the people and rulers of Wye found it difficult to forget that they had once been-however imperfectly and temporarily-supreme. The brief period when Rashelle, as Mayoress of Wye, had challenged the Empire, eighteen years earlier, had added both to Wye's pride and to its frustration.

All this made it reasonable that the small band of leading conspirators should feel as safe in Wye as they would feel anywhere on Trantor.

Five of them sat about a table in a room in a run-down portion of the sector. The room was poorly furnished but well-shielded.

In a chair which was marginally superior in quality to the others sat the man who might well be judged by this fact to be the leader. He had a thin face, a sallow complexion, a wide mouth with lips so pale as to be nearly invisible. There was a touch of gray in his hair, but his eyes burned with an inextinguishable anger.

He was staring at the man seated exactly opposite him; distinctly older and softer, hair almost white, with plump cheeks that tended to quiver when he spoke.

The leader said sharply, “Well? It is quite apparent you have done nothing. Explain that!”

The older man tried to bluster. He said, “I am an old Joranumite, Namarti. Why do I have to explain my actions?”

Gambol Deen Namarti, once the right hand man of Laskin “JoJo” Joranum, said, “There are many old Joranumites. Some are incompetent; some are soft; some have forgotten. Being an old Joranumite may mean no more than that one is an old fool.”

The older man sat back in his chair. “Are you calling me an old fool? Me? I am Kaspal Kaspalov-I was with JoJo when you had not yet joined the party, when you were a ragged nothing looking for a cause.”

“I am not calling you a fool,” said Namarti sharply. “I say simply that some old Joranumites are fools. You have a chance now to show me that you are not one of them.”

“My association with JoJo-”

“Forget that. He's dead!”

“I should think his spirit lives on.”

“If that thought will help us in our fight then his spirit lives on. But to others; not to us. We know he made mistakes.”

“I deny that.”

“Don't insist on making a hero out of a mere man who made mistakes. He thought he could move the world by the strength of oratory alone, by words-”

“History shows that words have moved mountains in the past.”

“Not Joranum's words, obviously, because he made mistakes. He hid his Mycogenian origins and did it too clumsily. Worse, he let himself be tricked into accusing the old First Minister of being a robot. I warned him against that robot accusation, but he wouldn't listen-and it destroyed him. Now let's start fresh, shall we? Whatever use we make of Joranum's memory for the outside world, let us not ourselves be transfixed by it.”

Kaspalov sat silent. The other three transferred their gaze from Namarti to Kaspalov and back, content to let Namarti carry the weight of the discussion.

“With Joranum's exile to Nishaya, the Joranumite movement fell apart and seemed to vanish,” said Namarti, harshly. “It would indeed have vanished but for me. Bit by bit and fragment by fragment, I rebuilt it into a network that extends over all of Trantor. You know this, I take it.”

“I know it, Chief,” mumbled Kaspalov. The use of the title made it plain he was seeking reconciliation now.

Namarti smiled tightly. He did not insist on the title but he always enjoyed hearing it used. He said, “You're part of this network and you have your duties.”

Kaspalov stirred. He was clearly debating with himself internally and, finally, he said slowly, “You tell me, Chief, that you warned Joranum against accusing the old First Minister. You say he didn't listen, but at least you had your say. May I have the same privilege of pointing out what I think is a mistake and have you listen to me as Joranum listened to you, even if you, like he, don't take the advice given you?”

“Of course you can speak your piece, Kaspalov. You are here in order that you might do so. What is your point?”

“These new tactics of ours, Chief, are a mistake. They create disruption, and do damage.”

“Of course! They are designed to do that.” Namarti stirred in his seat, controlling his anger with an effort. “Joranum tried persuasion. It didn't work. We will bring Trantor down by action.”

“For how long? And at what cost?”

“For as long as it takes, and at very little cost, actually. A power stoppage here, a water break there, a sewage backup, an air-

conditioning halt. Inconvenience and discomfort; that's all it means."

Kaspalov shook his head. "These things are cumulative."

"Of course, Kaspalov, and we want public dismay and resentment to be cumulative, too. Listen, Kaspalov. The Empire is decaying. Everyone knows that. Everyone capable of intelligent thought knows that. The technology will fail here and there even if we do nothing. We're just helping it along a little."

"It's dangerous, Chief. Trantor's infrastructure is incredibly complicated. A careless push may bring it down in ruins. Pull the wrong string and Trantor may topple, like a house of cards."

"It hasn't so far."

"It may in the future. And what if the people find out that we are behind it? They would tear us apart. There would be no need to call in the police or the armed forces. Mobs would destroy us."

"How would they ever learn enough to blame us? The natural target for the people's resentment will be the government-the Emperor's advisers. They will never look beyond that."

"And how do we live with ourselves, knowing what we have done?"

This last was asked in a whisper, the old man clearly moved by strong emotion. His eyes looked pleadingly across the table at his leader, the man to whom he had sworn allegiance. He had done so in the belief that Namarti would truly continue to bear the standard of freedom passed on by Laskin Joranum; now, Kaspalov wondered if this was how JoJo would have wanted his dream to come to pass.

Namarti clucked his tongue, much as a reproving parent does when confronting an errant child.

"Kaspalov, you can't seriously be turning sentimental on us, can you? Once we are in power, we will pick up the pieces and rebuild. We will gather in the people with all of Joranum's old talk of popular participation in government, with greater representation, and when we are firmly in power we will establish a more efficient and forceful government. We will then have a better Trantor and a stronger Empire. We will set up some sort of discussion system whereby representatives of world regions can talk themselves into a daze, but we will do the governing."

Kaspalov sat there, irresolute.

Namarti smiled joylessly. "You are not certain? We can't lose. It's been working perfectly, and it will continue working perfectly. The Emperor doesn't know what's going on. He hasn't the faintest notion. And his First Minister is a mathematician. He ruined Joranum, true, but since then he has done nothing."

"He has something called-called-"

"Forget it. Joranum attached a great deal of importance to it, but

it was a part of his being Mycogenian, like his robot mania. This mathematician has *nothing*-"

"Historical psychoanalysis, or something like that. I heard Joranum once say-"

"*Forget* it. Just do your part. You handle the ventilation in the Anemoria sector, don't you? Very well, then. Have it malfunction in a manner of your choosing. It either shuts down so that the humidity rises, or it produces a peculiar odor, or something else. None of this will kill anyone, so don't get yourself into a fever of virtuous guilt. You will simply make people uncomfortable and raise the general level of discomfort and annoyance. Can we depend on you?"

"But what would only be discomfort and annoyance to the young and healthy, may be more than that to infants, the aged, and the sick."

"Are you going to insist that no one at all must be hurt?"

Kaspalov mumbled something.

Namarti said, "It's impossible to do *anything* with a guarantee that no one at all will be hurt. You just do your job. Do it in such a way that you hurt as few as possible, if your conscience insists upon it, but do it."

Kaspalov said, "Look! I have one thing more to say, Chief."

"Then say it," said Namarti wearily.

"We can spend years poking at the infrastructure. The time must come when you take advantage of gathering dissatisfaction to seize the government. How do you intend to do that?"

"You want to know exactly how we'll do it?"

"Yes, the faster we strike, the more limited the damage, the more efficiently the surgery is performed."

Namarti said slowly, "I have not yet decided on the nature of this surgical strike. But it will come. Until then will you do your part?"

Kaspalov nodded his head in resignation. "Yes, Chief."

"Well, then, go," said Namarti, with a sharp gesture of dismissal.

Kaspalov rose, turned, and left. Namarti watched him go. He said to the man at his right, "Kaspalov is not be trusted. He has sold out and it's only so that he can betray us that he wants to know my plans for the future. Take care of him."

The other nodded, and all three left, leaving Namarti alone in the room. He switched off the glowing wall panels, leaving only a lonely square in the ceiling to provide the light that would keep him from being entirely in the darkness.

He thought: Every chain has weak links that must be eliminated. We have had to do this in the past and the result is that we have an organization that is untouchable.

And in the dimness, he smiled, twisting his face into a kind of feral joy. After all, the network extended even into the Palace itself-

not quite firmly, not quite reliably, but it was there. And it would be strengthened.

6.

The weather was holding up over the undomed area of the Imperials Palace grounds-warm and sunny.

It didn't often happen. Hari remembered Dors telling him once how it came about that this particular area, with its cold winters and frequent rains, had been chosen as the site.

“It wasn't actually *chosen*,” she said. “It was a family estate of the Morovian family in the days when all there was was a Kingdom of Trantor. When the Kingdom became an Empire, there were numerous sites where the Emperor could live-summer resorts, winter places, sports lodges, beach properties. And, as the planet was slowly domed, one reigning Emperor, living here, liked it, and it remained undomed. And, just because it was the *only* area left undomed, it became special-a place apart-and that uniqueness appealed to the next Emperor, and the next, and the next… and so, a tradition was born.”

And as always, when hearing something like that, Seldon would think: And how would Psychohistory handle this? Would it predict that one area would remain undomed but be absolutely unable to say which area? Could it go even so far? Could it predict that several areas would remain undomed, or none-and be wrong? How could it account for the personal likes and dislikes of an Emperor who happened to be on the throne at the crucial time and who made a decision in a moment of whimsy and nothing more? That way chaos lay-and madness.

Cleon I was clearly enjoying the good weather.

“I'm getting old, Seldon,” he said. “I don't have to tell you that. We're the same age, you and I. Surely it's a sign of age when I don't have the impulse to play tennis, or go fishing, even though they've newly restocked the lake, but am willing to walk gently over the pathways.”

He was eating nuts as he spoke, something which resembled what on Seldon's native world of Helicon would have been called pumpkin seeds, but which were larger, and a little less delicate in taste. Cleon cracked them gently between his teeth, peeled the thin shells and popped the kernels into his mouth.

Seldon did not like the taste particularly but, of course, when he was offered some by the Emperor, he accepted them, and ate a few.

The Emperor had a number of shells in his hand and looked vaguely about for a receptacle of some sort that he could use for disposal. He saw none, but he did notice a gardener standing not far away, his body at attention, as it should be in the Imperial presence, and his head respectfully bowed.

Cleon said, “Gardener!”

The gardener approached quickly. “Sire!”

“Get rid of these for me,” and he tapped the shells into the gardener's hand.

“Yes, Sire.”

Seldon said, “I have a few, too, Gruber.”

Gruber held out his hand and said, almost shyly, “Yes, First Minister.”

He hurried away, and the Emperor looked after him curiously. “Do you know the fellow, Seldon?”

“Yes, indeed, Sire. An old friend.”

“The *gardener* is an old friend? What is he? A mathematical colleague fallen on hard times?”

“No, Sire. Perhaps you remember the story. It was the time when” (he cleared his throat searching for the most tactful way to recall the incident) “the sergeant threatened my life shortly after I was appointed to my present post through your kindness.”

“The assassination attempt.” Cleon looked up to heaven as though seeking patience. “I don't know why everyone is so afraid of that word.”

“Perhaps,” said Seldon, smoothly, slightly despising himself for the ease with which he had come to be able to flatter, “the rest of us are more perturbed at the possibility of something untoward happening to our Emperor than you yourself are.”

Cleon smiled ironically. “I dare say. And what has this to do with Gruber? Is that his name?”

“Yes, Sire. Mandell Gruber. I'm sure you will recall, if you cast your mind back, that there was a gardener who came rushing up with a rake to defend me against the armed sergeant.”

“Ah, yes. Was he the gardener who did that?”

“He was the man, Sire. I've considered him a friend ever since, and I meet him almost every time I am on the grounds. I think he watches for me; feels proprietary toward me. And, of course, I feel kindly toward him.”

“I don't blame you. -And while we're on the subject, how is your formidable lady, Ms. Venabili? I don't see her often.”

“She's a historian, Sire. Lost in the past.”

“She doesn't frighten you? She'd frighten me. I've been told how she treated that sergeant. One could almost be sorry for him.”

“She grows savage on my behalf, Sire, but has not had occasion to do so lately. It's been very quiet.”

The Emperor looked after the disappearing gardener. “Have we ever rewarded that man?”

“I have done so, Sire. He has a wife and two daughters and I have

arranged that each daughter will have a sum of money put aside for the education of any children she may have."

"Very good. But he needs a promotion, I think. -Is he a good gardener?"

"Excellent, Sire."

"The Chief Gardener, Malcomber-I'm not quite sure I remember his name-is getting on and is, perhaps, not up to the job any more. He is well into his late seventies. Do you think this Gruber might be able to take over?"

"I'm certain he can, Sire, but he likes his present job. It keeps him out in the open in all kinds of weathers."

"A peculiar recommendation for a job. I'm sure he can get used to administration, and I *do* need someone for some sort of renewal of the grounds. Hmmm. I must think upon this. Your friend Gruber may be just the man I need. -By the way, Seldon, what did you mean by saying it's been very quiet?"

"I merely meant, Sire, that there has been no sign of discord at the Imperial Court. The unavoidable tendency to intrigue seems to be as near a minimum as it is ever likely to get."

"You wouldn't say that if you were Emperor, Seldon, and had to contend with all these officials and their complaints."

"They should bring these complaints to me, Sire."

"They know my soft heart, Seldon, and avoid your harshness."

"Sire!"

"Just joking. However, that's not what I mean. How can you tell me things are quiet when reports seem to reach me every other week of some serious breakdown here and there on Trantor?"

"These things are bound to happen."

"I don't recall that such things happened so frequently in previous years."

"Perhaps that was because they didn't, Sire. The infrastructure grows older with time. To make the necessary repairs properly would take time, labor, and enormous expense. This is not a time when a rise in taxes will be looked on favorably."

"There's never any such time. I gather that the people are experiencing serious dissatisfaction over these breakdowns. It must stop and you must see to it, Seldon. What does Psychohistory say?"

"It says what common sense says, that everything is growing older."

"Well, all this is quite spoiling the pleasant day for me. I leave it in your hands, Seldon."

"Yes, Sire," said Seldon submissively.

The Emperor strode off and Seldon thought that it was all spoiling the pleasant day for him, too. This breakdown at the center was the

alternative he didn't want. But how was he to prevent it and switch the crisis to the Periphery?

Psychohistory didn't say.

7.

Raych Seldon felt extraordinarily contented, for it was the first dinner *en famille* that he had had in some months with the two people he thought of as his father and mother. He knew perfectly well that they were not his parents in any biological sense, but it didn't matter. He merely smiled at them in complete love.

The surroundings were not as warm as they had been at Streeling in the old days, when their home had been small and intimate, and had sat like a comfortable gem in the larger setting of the university. Now, unfortunately, nothing could hide the grandeur of a Palace suite.

Raych sometimes stared at himself in the mirror and wondered how it could be. He was not tall, only 163 centimeters in height, distinctly shorter than either parent. He was rather stocky, but muscular, and not fat, with black hair and the distinctive Dahlite mustache that he kept as dark and as thick as possible.

In the mirror, he could still see the street-urchin he had once been before the chanciest of great chances had dictated his meeting with Seldon and Venabili. Seldon had been much younger then, and his appearance now made it plain that Raych himself was almost as old now as Seldon had been when they met.

Amazingly, his mother, Dors, had hardly changed at all. She was as sleek and fit as the day she and Hari were accosted by young Raych and his fellow Billibotton gang members. And he, Raych, born to poverty and misery, was now a member of the civil service, a small cog in the Ministry of Populations.

Seldon said, “How are things going at the Ministry, Raych? Any progress?”

“Some, Dad. The laws are passed. The court decisions are made. Speeches are pronounced. Still, it's difficult to move people. You can preach brotherhood all you want, but no one feels like a brother. What gets me is that the Dahlites are as bad as any of the others. They want to be treated as equals, they say, and so they do, but, given a chance, they have no desire to treat others as equals.”

Venabili said, “It's all but impossible to change people's minds and hearts, Raych. It's enough to try and perhaps eliminate the worst of the injustices.”

“The trouble is,” said Seldon, “that through most of history, no one's been working on this problem. Human beings have been allowed to fester in the delightful game of I'm-better-than-you, and cleaning up that mess isn't easy. If we allow things to follow their own bent and grow worse for a thousand years, we can't complain if it takes, say, one hundred years to work an improvement.”

“Sometimes, Dad,” said Raych, “I think you gave me this job to punish me.”

Seldon's eyebrows raised. “What motivation could I have had to punish you?”

“For feeling attracted to Joranum's program of sector-equality and for greater popular representation in government.”

“I don't blame you for that. These are attractive suggestions, but you know that Joranum and his gang were using it only as a device to gain power. Afterward-”

“But you had me entrap him despite my attraction to his views.”

Seldon said, “It wasn't easy for me to ask you to do that.”

“And now you keep me working at the implementation of Joranum's program, just to show me how hard the task is in reality.”

Seldon said to Venabili, “How do you like that, Dors? The boy attributes to me a kind of sneaky underhandedness that simply isn't part of my character.”

“Surely,” said Venabili, with the ghost of a smile playing at her lips, “you are attributing no such thing to your father.”

“Not really. In the ordinary course of life, there's no one straighter than you, Dad. But if you *have* to, you know you can stack the cards. Isn't that what you hope to do with Psychohistory?”

Seldon said sadly, “So far, I've done very little with Psychohistory.”

“Too bad. I keep thinking that there is some sort of psychohistorical solution to the problem of human bigotry.”

“Maybe there is, but, if so, I haven't found it.”

When dinner was over, Seldon said, “You and I, Raych, are going to have a little talk now.”

“Indeed?” said Venabili. “I take it I'm not invited.”

“Ministerial business, Dors.”

“Ministerial nonsense, Hari. You're going to ask the poor boy to do something I wouldn't want him to do.”

Seldon said firmly, “I'm certainly not going to ask him to do anything *he* doesn't want to do.”

Raych said, “It's all right, Mom. Let Dad and me have our talk. I promise I'll tell you all about it afterward.”

Venabili's eyes rolled upward. “You two will plead ‘state secrets.’ I know it.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Seldon firmly. “That's exactly what I must discuss. And of the first magnitude. I'm serious, Dors.”

Venabili rose, her lips tightening. She left the room with one final injunction. “Don't throw the boy to the wolves, Hari.”

And after she was gone, Seldon said quietly, “I'm afraid that throwing you to the wolves is exactly what I'll have to do, Raych.”

8.

They faced each other in Seldon's private Ministerial office, his "thinking place" as he called it. There he had spent uncounted hours trying to think his way past and through the complexities of Trantorian and Imperial government.

He said, "Have you read much about the recent breakdowns we've been having in planetary services, Raych?"

"Yes," said Raych, "but you know, Dad, we've got an old planet here. What we gotta do is get everyone off it, dig the whole thing up, replace everything, add the latest computerizations, and then bring everyone back, or at least half of everyone. Trantor would be much better off with only twenty billion people."

"Which twenty billion?" asked Seldon, smiling.

"I wish I knew," said Raych darkly. "The trouble is we can't redo the planet, so we just gotta keep patching."

"I'm afraid so, Raych, but there are some peculiar things about it. Now I want you to check me out. I have some thoughts about this."

He brought a small sphere out of his pocket.

"What's that?" asked Raych.

"It's a map of Trantor, carefully programmed. Do me a favor, Raych, and clear off this table top."

Seldon placed the sphere more or less in the middle of the table and placed his hand on a keypad in the arm of his desk chair. He used his thumb to close a contact and the light in the room went out while the table top glowed with a soft ivory light that seemed about a centimeter deep. The sphere had flattened and expanded to the edges of the table.

The light slowly darkened in spots and took on a pattern. After some thirty seconds, Raych said, in surprise, "It *is* a map of Trantor."

"Of course. I told you it was. You can't buy anything like this at a sector mall, though. This is one of those gadgets the armed forces play with. It could present Trantor as a sphere, but a planar projection would more clearly show what I want to show."

"And what is it you want to show, Dad?"

"Well, in the last year or two, there have been breakdowns. As you say, it's an old planet and we've got to expect breakdowns, but they've been coming more frequently and they would seem, almost uniformly, to be the result of human error."

"Isn't that reasonable?"

"Yes, of course. Within limits. This is true even where earthquakes are involved."

"Earthquakes? On Trantor?"

“I admit Trantor is a fairly non-seismic planet, and a good thing, too, because enclosing a world in a dome when the world is going to shake itself badly several times a year and smash a section of the dome would be highly impractical. Your mother says that one of the reasons Trantor, rather than some other world, became the Imperial capital is that it was geologically moribund-that's her unflattering expression. Still, it might be moribund, but it's not dead. There are occasional minor earthquakes, three of them in the last two years.”

“I wasn't aware of that, Dad.”

“Hardly anyone is. The dome isn't a single object. It exists in hundreds of sections, each one of which can be lifted and set ajar to relieve tensions and compressions in case of an earthquake. Since an earthquake, when one does occur, lasts for only ten seconds to a minute, the opening endures only briefly. It comes and goes so rapidly that the Trantorians beneath are not even aware of it. They are much more aware of a mild tremor, and a faint rattling of crockery, than of the opening and closing of the dome overhead and the slight intrusion of the outside weather, whatever it is.”

“That's good, isn't it?”

“It should be. It's computerized, of course. The coming of an earthquake anywhere sets off the key controls for the opening and closing of that section of the dome, so that it opens just before the vibration becomes strong enough to do damage.”

“Still good.”

“But in the case of the three minor earthquakes over the last two years, the dome controls failed in each case. The dome never opened, and in each case repairs were required. It took some time, it took some money, and the weather controls were less than optimum for a considerable time. Now what, Raych, are the chances that the equipment would have failed in all three cases?”

“Not high?”

“Not high at all. Less than one in a hundred. One can suppose that someone had gimmicked the controls in advance of an earthquake. Now once a century, we have a magma leak, which is far more difficult to control, and I'd hate to think of the results if it went unnoticed till it was too late. Fortunately that hasn't happened, and isn't likely to, but consider- Here on this map you will find the location of the breakdowns that have plagued us over the past two years and that seem to be attributable to human error, though we haven't once been able to tell to *whom* it might be attributed.”

“That's because everyone is busy protecting his back.”

“I'm afraid you're right. That's a characteristic of any bureaucracy and Trantor's is the largest in history. -But what do you think of the locations?”

The map had lit up with bright little red markings that looked like small pustules covering the land surface of Trantor.

“Well,” said Raych cautiously. “They seem to be evenly spread.”

“Exactly, and that's what's interesting. One would expect that the older sections of Trantor, the sections longest domed, would have the most decayed infrastructure and would be more liable to events requiring quick human decision and laying the groundwork for possible human error. -I'll superimpose the older sections of Trantor on the map in a bluish color, and you'll notice that the breakdowns don't seem to be taking place on the blue any oftener than on the white.”

“And?”

“And what I think it means, Raych, is that the breakdowns are not of natural origin, but are deliberately caused, and spread out in this fashion to affect as many people as possible, thus creating a dissatisfaction that is as wide-spread as possible.”

“It don't seem likely.”

“No? Then let's look at the breakdowns as spread through time rather than through space.”

The blue areas and the red spots disappeared and, for a time, the map of Trantor was blank, and then the markings began to appear and disappear one at a time, here and there.

“Notice,” said Seldon, “that they don't appear in clumps in time, either. One appears, then another, then another, and so on, almost like the steady ticking of a metronome.”

“Do ya think that's on purpose too?”

“It must be. Whoever is bringing this about wants to cause as much disruption with as little effort as possible, so there's no use doing two at once, where one will partially cancel the other in the news and in the public consciousness. Each incident must stand out in full irritation.”

The map went out, the lights went on. Seldon returned the sphere, shrunken back to its original size, to his pocket.

Raych said, “Who would be doing all this?”

Seldon said thoughtfully, “A few days ago, I received a report of a murder in Wye sector.”

“That's not unusual,” said Raych. “Even though Wye isn't one of your really lawless sectors, there must be lots of murders there every day.”

“Hundreds,” said Seldon, shaking his head. “We've had bad days when the number of deaths by violence in Trantor as a whole approaches the million-a-day mark. Generally, there's not much chance of finding every culprit, every murderer. The dead just enter the books as anonymous statistics.

“This one, however, was unusual. The man had been knifed, but unskillfully. He was still alive when found, just barely. He had time to gasp out one word before he died, and that was, ‘Chief.’

“That roused a certain curiosity and he was actually identified. He works in Anemoria and what he was doing in Wye, we don't know. But then, some worthy officer managed to dig up the fact that he was an old Joranumite. His name was Kaspal Kaspalov, and he is well-known to have been one of the intimates of Laskin Joranum. And now he's dead, knifed.”

Raych frowned, “Are you suspecting a Joranumite conspiracy? There aren't any Joranumites around anymore.”

“It wasn't long ago that your mother asked me if I thought that the Joranumites were still active, and I told her that any odd belief always retained a certain cadre, sometimes for centuries. They're usually not very important; just splinter groups that simply don't count. Still, what if the Joranumites have kept up an organization, what if they have retained a certain strength, what if they are capable of killing someone they consider a traitor in their ranks, and what if they are producing these breakdowns as a preliminary to seizing control?”

“That's an awful lot of ‘if's', Dad.”

“I know that. And I might be totally wrong. The murder happened in Wye and, as it further happens, there have been no infrastructure breakdowns in Wye.”

“What does that prove?”

“It might prove that the center of the conspiracy is in Wye and that the conspirators don't want to make themselves uncomfortable, only the rest of Trantor. It also might mean that it's not the Joranumites at all, but the old Wyan ruling house that still dreams of Empire.”

“Oh, boy, Dad. You're building all this on very little.”

“I know. Now suppose it *is* a Joranumite conspiracy. Joranum had, as his right-hand man, Gambol Deen Namarti. We have no record of his death, no record of his having left Trantor, no record of his life over the last nine years or so. That's not terribly surprising. After all, it's easy to lose oneself among forty billion. There was a time in my life when I tried to do just that. Of course, he may be dead. That would be the easiest explanation, but he may not be.”

“What do we do about it?”

Seldon sighed. “The logical thing would be to turn to the police, to the security establishment, but I can't. I don't have Demerzel's presence. He could cow people; I can't. He had a powerful personality; I'm just a… mathematician. I shouldn't be in the post of First Minister; I'm not fitted for it. And I wouldn't be, if the Emperor weren't fixated

on Psychohistory to a far greater extent than it deserves."

"You're kinda whipping yourself, ain't you, Dad?"

"Yes. I suppose I am, but I have a picture of myself going to the security forces, for instance, with what I have just shown you on the map" (he pointed to the now-empty table top) "and arguing that we are in great danger of some conspiracy of unknown consequence and nature. They would listen solemnly and, after I had left, they would laugh among themselves, and joke about 'the mathematician,' and they would do nothing."

"Then what do we do about it?" said Raych, returning to the point.

"It's what *you* will do about it, Raych. I need more evidence and I want you to find it for me. I would send your mother, but she won't leave me under any circumstances. I myself can't leave the Palace grounds at this time. Next to Dors and myself, I trust you. More than Dors and myself, in fact. You're still quite young, you're strong, you're a better Heliconian Twister than I ever was, and you're smart."

"Wow, Dad. I wish you'd put that in writing!"

"Mind you, now, I don't want you to risk your life. No heroism, no derring-do. I couldn't face your mother if anything happened to you. Just find out what you can. Perhaps you'll find that Namarti is alive and operating-or dead. Perhaps you'll find out that the Joranumites are an active group-or moribund. Perhaps you'll find out that the Wyan ruling family is active-or not. Any of that would be interesting, but not vital. What I want you to find out is whether the infrastructure breakdowns are of human manufacture, as I think they are, and, far more important still, if they are deliberately caused, what else the conspirators plan to do. It seems to me they must have plans for some major coup, and, if so, I must know what that will be."

Raych said cautiously, "Do you have some kinda plan to get me started?"

"Yes, indeed, Raych. I want you to go down to Wye where Kaspalov was killed. Find out if you can if he was an active Joranumite and see if you can't join a Joranumite cell yourself."

"Maybe that's possible. I can always pretend to be an old Joranumite. Just a kid when JoJo was sounding off, but I was very impressed by his ideas. It's even sorta true."

"Well, yes, but there's one important catch. You might be recognized. After all, you're the son of the First Minister. You have appeared on holovision now and then, you've been an attraction for the news reports, you have been interviewed on your views on sector equality."

"Sure, but-"

"No buts, Raych. You'll wear elevated shoes to add three

centimeters to your height, and we'll have someone show you how to change the shape of your eyebrows and make your face fuller and change the timbre of your voice."

Raych shrugged. "A lotta trouble for nothing."

"*And*," said Seldon, with a distinct quaver, "you will shave off your mustache."

Raych's eyes widened and for a moment he sat there in appalled silence. Finally, he said, in a hoarse whisper, "Shave my mustache?"

"Clean as a whistle. No one would recognize you without it."

"But it can't be done. Like cutting your-like castration."

Seldon shook his head. "It's just a cultural curiosity. Yugo is as Dahlite as you are and he wears no mustache."

"Yugo is a *nut*. I don't think he's alive at all except for his mathematics."

"He's a great mathematician and the absence of a mustache does not alter that fact. Besides, it's *not* castration. Your mustache will grow back in two weeks."

"Two weeks! It'll take two *years* to reach this-this-"

He put his hand up as though to cover and protect it.

Seldon said inexorably, "Raych, you have to do it. It's a sacrifice you must make. If you act as my spy *with* your mustache, you may-come to harm. I can't take that chance."

"I'd *rather* die," said Raych violently.

"Don't be melodramatic," said Seldon severely. "You would *not* rather die, and this is something you *must* do. However," and here he hesitated, "don't say anything about it to your mother. I will take care of that."

Raych stared at his father in frustration and then said, in a low and despairing tone, "All right, Dad."

Seldon said, "I will get someone to supervise your disguise and then you will go to Wye by air. -Buck up, Raych, it's not the end of the world."

Raych smiled wanly, and Seldon watched him leave, a deeply troubled look on his face. A mustache could easily be regrown, but a son could not. Seldon was perfectly well aware that he was sending Raych into danger.

9.

We all have our small illusions and Cleon I, Emperor of the Galaxy, King of Trantor, and a wide collection of other titles that, on rare occasions, could be called out in a long sonorous roll, was convinced that he was a person of democratic spirit.

It always angered him when he was warned off a course of action by Demerzel, or, later, by Seldon, on the grounds that such action would be looked on as tyrannical or despotic.

He was not a tyrant or despot by disposition, he was certain; he only wanted to take firm and decisive action.

He spoke many times with nostalgic approval of the days when Emperors could mingle freely with their subjects, but now, of course when their history of coups and assassinations, actual or attempted, had become a dreary fact of life, the Emperor had had to be shut off from the world.

It is doubtful that Cleon, who had never in his life met with people except under the most constricted of conditions, would really have felt at home in off-hand encounters with strangers, but he always imagined he would enjoy it. He was grateful, therefore, for a rare chance of talking to one of the underlings on the grounds, to smile, and to doff the trappings of Imperial rule for a few minutes. It made him feel democratic.

There was this gardener whom Seldon had spoken of, for instance. It would be fitting, rather a pleasure, to reward him belatedly for his loyalty and bravery, and to do so himself rather than leaving it to some functionary.

He therefore arranged to meet him in the spacious rose garden which, at this time, was in full bloom. That would be appropriate, Cleon thought, but, of course, they would have to bring the gardener there first. It was unthinkable for the Emperor to be made to wait. It is one thing to be democratic; quite another to be inconvenienced.

The gardener was waiting for him among the roses, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. It occurred to Cleon that it was possible no one had told the fellow the exact reason for the meeting. Well, he would reassure him in kindly fashion-except that, now he came to think of it, he could not remember the fellow's name.

He turned to one of the officials at his side, and said, “What is the gardener's name?”

“Sire, it is Mandell Gruber. He has been a gardener here for twenty-two years.”

The Emperor nodded, and said, “Ah, Gruber. How glad I am to meet a worthy and hard-working gardener.”

“Sire,” mumbled Gruber, his teeth chattering. “I am not a man of many talents, but it is always my best I try to do on behalf of your gracious self.”

“Of course, of course,” said the Emperor, wondering if the gardener suspected him of sarcasm. These men of the lower classes lacked the finer feelings that came with refinement and manners. It was what always made any attempt at democratic display difficult.

Cleon said, “I have heard from my First Minister of the loyalty with which you once came to his aid, and your skill in taking care of the grounds. The First Minister tells me that he and you are quite friendly.”

“Sire, the First Minister is most gracious to me, but I know my place. I never speak to him unless he speaks first.”

“Quite, Gruber. That shows good feeling on your part, but the First Minister, like myself, is a man of democratic impulses, and I trust his judgment of people.”

Gruber bowed low.

The Emperor said, “As you know, Gruber, the Chief Gardener, Malcomber, is quite old and longs to retire. The responsibilities are becoming greater than he can bear.”

“Sire, the Chief Gardener is much respected by all the gardeners. May he be spared for many years so that we can all come to him for the benefit of his wisdom and judgment.”

“Well said, Gruber,” said the Emperor carelessly, “but you very well know that that is just mumbo-jumbo. He is not going to be spared, at least not with the strength and wit necessary for the position. He himself requests retirement within the year and I have granted him that. It remains to find a replacement.”

“Oh, Sire, there are fifty men and women in this grand place who could be Chief Gardener.”

“I dare say,” said the Emperor, “But my choice has fallen upon you.” The Emperor smiled graciously. This was the moment he had been waiting for. Gruber would now, he expected, fall to his knees in an ecstasy of gratitude.

He did not, and the Emperor frowned.

Gruber said, “Sire, it is an honor that is too great for me, entirely.”

“Nonsense,” said Cleon, offended that his judgment should be called into question. “It is about time that your virtues are recognized. You will no longer have to be exposed to weather of all kinds at all times of the year. You will have the Chief Gardener's office, a fine place, which I will have redecorated for you, and where you can bring your family-You do have a family, don't you, Gruber?”

“Yes, Sire. A wife, and two daughters. And a son-in-law.”

“Very good. You will be very comfortable and you will enjoy your new life, Gruber. You will be indoors, Gruber, and out of the weather, like a true Trantorian.”

“Sire, consider that I am an Anacreonian by upbringing-”

“I have considered, Gruber. All worlds are alike to the Emperor. It is done. The new job is what you deserve.”

He nodded his head and stalked off. Cleon was satisfied with this latest show of his benevolence. Of course, he could have used a little more gratitude from the fellow, a little more appreciation, but at least it was done.

And it was much easier to have *this* done than to settle the matter of the failing infrastructure.

Cleon had, in a moment of testiness, declared that whenever a breakdown could be attributed to human error, the human being in question should forthwith be executed.

“A few executions,” he said, “and it's remarkable how careful everyone will become.”

“I'm afraid, Sire,” Seldon had said, “that this would be considered despotic behavior and would not accomplish what you wish. It would probably force the workers to go on strike and if you try to force them back to work, there would then be an insurrection, and if you try to replace them with soldiers, you will find they do not know how to control the machinery, so that breakdowns will begin to take place much more frequently.”

It was no wonder that Cleon turned to the matter of appointing a Chief Gardener with relief.

As for Gruber, he gazed after the departing Emperor with chill horror. He was going to be taken from the freedom of the open air and condemned to the constriction of four walls.

– Yet how could one refuse the Emperor?

10.

Raych looked in the mirror of his Wye hotel room somberly (it was a pretty rundown hotel room, but Raych was not supposed to have much money). He did not like what he saw. His mustache was gone; his sideburns were shortened; his hair was clipped at the sides and back.

He looked-plucked.

Worse than that. As a result of the change in his facial contours, he looked baby-faced.

It was disgusting.

Nor was he making any headway. Seldon had given him the police reports on Kaspal Kaspalov's death, which he had studied. There wasn't much there. Just that Kaspalov had been murdered and that the local police had come up with nothing of importance in connection with that murder. It seemed quite clear that the police attached little or no importance to it, anyway.

That was not surprising. In the last century, the crime rate had risen markedly in most worlds, *certainly* in the grandly complex world of Trantor, and nowhere were the local police up to the job of doing anything useful about it. In fact, the police had declined in numbers and efficiency everywhere and (while this was hard to prove) had become more corrupt. It was inevitable this should be so, with pay refusing to keep pace with the cost of living. One must *pay* to keep civil officials honest. Failing that, they would surely make up for inadequate salaries in other ways

Seldon had been preaching that doctrine for some years now, but it did no good. There was no way to increase wages without increasing taxes and the populace would not sit still for increased taxes. It seemed they would rather lose ten times the money in graft.

It was all part (Seldon had said) of the general deterioration of Imperial society over the previous two centuries.

Well, what was Raych to do? He was here at the hotel where Kaspalov had lived during the days immediately before his murder. Somewhere in the hotel there might be someone who had something to do with that, or who knew someone who had.

It seemed to Raych that he must make himself conspicuous. He must show an interest in Kaspalov's death, and then, someone would get interested in *him* and pick *him* up. It was dangerous, but if he could make himself sound harmless enough, they might not attack him immediately.

Well-

Raych looked at the time-strip. There would be people enjoying

pre-dinner aperitifs in the bar. He might as well join them, and see what would happen-if anything.

11.

In some respects, Wye could be quite puritanical. (This was true of all the sections, though the rigidity of one sector might be completely different from the rigidity of another.) Here, the drinks were not alcoholic, but were synthetically designed to stimulate in other ways. Raych did not like the taste, finding himself utterly unused to it, but it meant he could sip slowly and have more time to look about.

He caught the eye of a young woman several tables away and, for a moment, had difficulty in looking away. She was attractive, and it was clear that Wye's ways were not puritanical in *every* fashion.

Their eyes clung, and, after a moment, the young woman smiled slightly and rose. She drifted toward Raych's table, while Raych watched her speculatively. He could scarcely (he thought with marked regret) afford a side-adventure just now.

She stopped for a moment when she reached Raych, and then let herself drop smoothly into an adjacent chair.

"Hello," she said, "you don't look like a regular here."

Raych smiled. "I'm not. Do you know all the regulars?"

"Just about," she said, unembarrassed. "My name is Manella. What's yours?"

Raych was more regretful than ever. She was quite tall, taller than he himself was without his heels-something he always found attractive-had a milky complexion, and long, softly wavy hair that had distinct glints of dark red in it. Her clothing was not too garish and she might, if she had tried very hard, have passed as a respectable woman of the not-too-hard-working class.

Raych said, "My name doesn't matter. I don't have much money."

"Oh. Too bad." Manella made a face. "Can't you get some?"

"I'd like to. I need a job. Do you know of any?"

"What kind of job?"

Raych shrugged. "I don't have any experience in anything fancy, but I ain't proud."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I'll tell you what, nameless. Sometimes it doesn't take much money."

Raych froze at once. He had been successful enough with women, but with his mustache-his mustache. What could she see in his baby-face?

He said, "Tell you what. I had a friend living here a couple of weeks ago and I can't find him. Since you know all the regulars, maybe you know him. His name is Kaspalov. Kaspal Kaspalov." He raised his voice slightly.

She stared at him blankly and shook her head. “I don't know anybody by that name.”

“Too bad. He was a Joranumite, and so am I.” Again, a blank look. “Do you know what a Joranumite is?”

She shook her head. “N-no. I've heard the word but don't know what it means. Is it some kind of job?”

Raych felt disappointed.

He said, “It would take too long to explain.”

It sounded like a dismissal and, after a moment of uncertainty, she rose, and drifted away. She did not smile, and Raych was a little surprised that she had remained as long as she did after it was established that he couldn't afford her.

(Well, Seldon always insisted he had the capacity to inspire affection, but surely not in a business woman. For them, payment was the thing. Of course, it meant they overlooked a man being short, but a number of pleasant ordinary women didn't seem to mind.)

His eyes followed Manella automatically as she stopped at another table, where a man was seated by himself. He was of early middle age, with butter-yellow hair, slicked back. He was very smooth-shaven, but it seemed to Raych he could have used a beard, his chin being too prominent and a bit asymmetric.

Apparently, she had no better luck with this beardless one. A few words were exchanged, and she moved on. Too bad, but it was impossible for her to fail often, surely. She was unquestionably desirable. It was surely just a matter of financial arrangements.

He found himself thinking, quite involuntarily, of what the upshot would be if he, after all, could-and then realized he had been joined by someone else. It was a man this time. It was, in fact, the man to whom Manella had just spoken.

He was astonished that his own preoccupation had allowed him to be thus approached and, in effect, caught by surprise. He couldn't very well afford this sort of thing.

The man looked at him with a glint of curiosity in his eyes. “You were just talking to a friend of mine.”

Raych could not help smiling broadly. “She's a friendly person.”

“Yes, she is. And a *good* friend of mine. I couldn't help overhearing what you said to her.”

“Wasn't nothing wrong, I think.”

“Not at all, but you called yourself a Joranumite.”

Raych's heart jumped. His remark to Manella had hit dead-center after all. It had meant nothing to her but it seemed to mean something to her “friend.”

Did that mean he was on the road now? Or merely in trouble?

12.

Raych did his best to size up his new companion, without allowing his own face to lose its smooth naivete. The man had sharp eyes and his right hand clenched almost threateningly into a fist as it rested on the table.

Raych looked owlishly at the other, and waited.

Again, the man said, “I understand you call yourself a Joranumite.”

Raych did his best to look uneasy. It was not difficult. He said, “Why do you ask, mister?”

“Because I don't think you're old enough.”

“I'm old enough. I used to listen to JoJo Joranum's speeches.”

“Can you quote them?”

Raych shrugged. “No, but I got the idea.”

“You're a brave young man to talk openly about being a Joranumite. Some people don't like that.”

“I'm told there are lots of Joranumites in Wye.”

“That may be. Is that why you came here?”

“I'm looking for a job. Maybe another Joranumite would help me.”

“There are Joranumites in Dahl, too. Where are you from?”

There was no question that he recognized Raych's accent. That could not be disguised.

He said, “I was born in Millimaru, but I lived mostly in Dahl when I was growing up.”

“Doing what?”

“Nothing much. Going to school some.”

“And why are you a Joranumite?”

Raych let himself heat up a bit. He couldn't have lived in downtrodden, discriminated-against Dahl without having obvious reasons for being a Joranumite. He said, “Because I think there should be a more representative government in the Empire; more participation by the people; and more equality among the sectors and the worlds. Doesn't anyone with brains and a heart think that?”

“And you want to see the Emperorship abolished?”

Raych paused. One could get away with a great deal in the way of subversive statements, but anything overtly anti-Emperor was stepping outside the bounds. He said, “I ain't saying that. I believe in the Emperor, but ruling a whole Empire is too much for one man.”

“It isn't one man. There's a whole Imperial bureaucracy. What do you think of Hari Seldon, the First Minister?”

“Don't think nothing about him. Don't know about him.”

“All you know is that people should be more represented in the affairs of government. Is that right?”

Raych allowed himself to look confused. “That's what JoJo Joranum used to say. I don't know what you call it. I heard someone once call it ‘democracy,’ but I don't know what that means.”

“Democracy is something they have on some worlds; something they call ‘democracy.’ I don't know that those worlds are run better than other worlds. So you're a democrat?”

“Is that what you call it?” Raych let his head sink as if in deep thought. “I feel more at home as a Joranumite.”

“Of course, as a Dahlite-”

“I just lived there a while.”

“-You're all for people's equalities and such things. The Dahlites, being an oppressed group, would naturally think in that fashion.”

“I hear that Wye is pretty strong in Joranumite thinking. *They're* not oppressed.”

“Different reason. The old Wye Mayors always wanted to be Emperors. Did you know that?”

Raych shook his head.

“Eighteen years ago,” said the man, “Mayor Rashelle nearly carried through a coup in that direction. So the Wyans are rebels; not so much Joranumite as anti-Cleon.”

Raych said, “I don't know nothing about that. I ain't against the Emperor.”

“But you are for popular representation, aren't you? Do you think that some sort of elected assembly could run the Galactic Empire without bogging down in politics and partisan bickering? Without paralysis?”

Raych said, “Huh? I don't understand.”

“Do you think a great many people could come to some decision quickly in times of emergency? Or would they just sit around and argue?”

“I don't know, but it doesn't seem right that just a few people should have all the say over all the worlds.”

“Are you willing to fight for your beliefs? Or do you just like to talk about them?”

“No one asked me to do any fighting,” said Raych.

“Suppose someone did. How important do you think your beliefs about democracy-or Joranumite philosophy-are?”

“I'd fight for them-if I thought it would do any good.”

“There's a brave lad. So you came to Wye to fight for your beliefs.”

“No,” said Raych, uncomfortably, “I can't say I did. I came to look for a job, sir. It ain't easy to find no jobs these days-and I ain't got no

money. A guy gotta live."

"I agree. What's your name?"

The question shot out without warning, but Raych was ready for it. "Planchet, sir."

"First or last name?"

"Only name, as far as I know."

"You have no money and, I gather, very little education."

"Afraid so."

"And no experience at any specialized job?"

"I ain't worked much, but I'm willing."

"All right. I'll tell you what, Planchet." He had taken a small, white triangle out of his pocket and pressed it in such a way as to produce a printed message on it. He then rubbed his thumb across it, freezing it. "I'll tell you where to go. You take this with you, and it may get you a job."

Raych took the card and glanced at it. The signals seemed to fluoresce, but Raych could not read them. He looked at the other out of the corner of his eye.

"What if they think I stole it?"

"It can't be stolen. It has my sign on it, and your name."

"What if they ask me your name?"

"They won't. -You say you want a job. There's your chance. I don't guarantee it, but there's your chance." He gave him another card, "This is where to go." Raych could read this one.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

The man made little dismissing gestures with his hand.

Raych rose, and left-and wondered what he was getting into.

13.

Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Gleb Andorin watched Gambol Deen Namarti trudging up and down. Namarti was obviously unable to sit still under the driving force of the violence of his passion.

Andorin thought: He's not the brightest man in the Empire, or even in the movement, not the shrewdest, certainly not the most capable of rational thought. He has to be held down constantly-but he's driven as none of the rest of us are. We would give up, let go, but *he* won't. Push, pull, prod, kick. -Well, maybe we need someone like that. We *must* have someone like that or nothing will ever happen.

Namarti stopped as though he felt Andorin's eyes boring into his back. He turned about and said, “If you're going to lecture me again on Kaspalov, don't bother.”

Andorin shrugged lightly. “Why bother lecturing? The deed is done. The harm, if any, has come to pass.”

“What harm, Andorin? What harm? If I had not done it, *then* we would have been harmed. The man was on the edge of being a traitor. Within a month, he would have gone running-”

“I know. I was there. I heard what he said.”

“Then you understand there was no choice. No choice. You don't think I liked to have an old comrade killed, do you? I had no choice.”

“Very well. You had no choice.”

Namarti resumed his tramping, then turned again. “Andorin, do you believe in gods?”

Andorin stared. “In what?”

“In gods.”

“I never heard the word. What is it?”

Namarti said, “It's not Galactic Standard. Supernatural influences-how's that?”

“Oh, supernatural influences. Why didn't you say so? No, I don't believe in that sort of thing. By definition, something is supernatural if it exists outside the laws of nature and nothing exists outside the laws of nature. Are you turning mystic?” Andorin asked it as though he were joking, but his eyes narrowed in sudden concern.

Namarti stared him down. Those blazing eyes of his could stare anyone down. “Don't be a fool. I've been reading about it. Trillions of people believe in supernatural influences.”

“I know,” said Andorin. “They always have.”

“They've done so since before the beginning of history. The word ‘gods’ is of unknown origin. It is, apparently, a hangover from some primeval language no trace of which any longer exists, except that

word. -Do you know how many different varieties of beliefs there are in various kinds of gods?"

"Approximately as many as the varieties of fools among the galactic population, I should say."

Namarti ignored that. "Some people think the word dates back to the time when all humanity existed on but a single world."

"Itself a mythological concept. That's just as lunatic as the notion of supernatural influences. There never was one original human world."

"There would have to be, Andorin," said Namarti, annoyed. "Human beings can't have evolved on different worlds and ended as a single species."

"Even so, there's no *effective* human world. It can't be located, it can't be defined, so it can't be spoken of sensibly, so it *effectively* doesn't exist."

"These gods," said Namarti, continuing to follow his own line of thought, "are supposed to protect humanity and keep it safe, or at least to care for those portions of humanity that know how to make use of the gods. At a time when there was only one human world, it makes sense to suppose they would be particularly interested in caring for that one tiny world with a few people. They would care for such a world as though they were big brothers, or parents."

"Very nice of them. I'd like to see them try to handle the entire Empire."

"What if they could? What if they were infinite?"

"What if the sun were frozen? What's the use of 'what if'?"

"I'm just speculating. Just thinking. Haven't you ever let your mind wander freely? Do you always keep everything on a leash?"

"I should imagine that's the safest way, keeping it on a leash. What does your wandering mind tell you, Chief?"

Namarti's eyes flashed at the other as though he suspected sarcasm, but Andorin's face remained good-natured and blank.

Namarti said, "What my mind is telling me is this-if there are gods, they must be on our side."

"Wonderful, if true. Where's the evidence?"

"Evidence? Without the gods, it would just be a coincidence, I suppose, but a very useful one." Suddenly, Namarti yawned and sat down, looking exhausted.

Good, thought Andorin. His galloping mind has finally wound itself down and he may talk sense now.

"This matter of internal breakdown of the infrastructure-" said Namarti, his voice distinctly lower.

Andorin interrupted. "You know, Chief, Kaspalov was not entirely wrong about this. The longer we keep it up, the greater the chance

that Imperial forces will discover the cause. The whole program must, sooner or later, explode in our faces."

"Not yet. So far, everything is exploding in the Imperial face. The unrest on Trantor is something I can feel." He raised his hands, rubbing his fingers together. "I can feel it. And we *are* almost through. We are ready for the next step."

Andorin smiled humorlessly. "I'm not asking for details, Chief. Kaspalov did, and you had him eliminated. I am not Kaspalov."

"It's precisely because you're not Kaspalov that I can tell you. And because I know something now I didn't then."

"I presume," said Andorin, only half-believing what he was saying, "that you intend a strike on the Imperial Palace grounds themselves."

Namarti looked up. "Of course. What else is there to do? The problem, however, is how to penetrate the grounds effectively. I have my sources of information there, but they are only spies. I'll need men of action on the spot."

"To get men of action into the most heavily guarded region in all the galaxy will not be easy."

"Of course not. That's what has been giving me an unbearable headache till now-and then the gods intervened."

Andorin said gently (it was taking all his self-restraint to keep him from showing his disgust), "I don't think we need a metaphysical discussion. What has happened-leaving the gods to one side?"

"My information is that his Gracious and ever to be Beloved Emperor, Cleon I, has decided to appoint a new Chief Gardener. This is the first new appointee in nearly a quarter of a century."

"And if so?"

"Do you see no significance?"

Andorin thought a bit. "I am not a favorite of your gods. I don't see any significance."

"If you have a new Chief Gardener, Andorin, the situation is the same as having a new administrator of any other type-the same as if you had a new First Minister, or a new Emperor. The new Chief Gardener will certainly want his own staff. He will force into retirement what he considers dead wood and will hire younger gardeners by the hundreds."

"That's possible."

"It's more than possible. It's certain. Exactly that happened when the present Chief Gardener was appointed, and the same when his predecessor was appointed, and so on. Hundreds of strangers from the Outer Worlds-"

"Why from the Outer Worlds?"

"Use your brains, if you have any, Andorin. What do Trantorians

know about gardening when they've lived under domes all their lives, tending potted plants, zoos, and carefully arranged crops of grains and fruit-trees? What do they know about life in the wild?"

"Ahhh. Now I understand."

"So there will be these strangers flooding the grounds. They will be carefully checked, I presume, but they won't be as tightly screened as they would be if they were Trantorians. And that means, surely, that we should be able to supply just a few of our own people with false identification, and get them inside. Even if some are screened out, a few might make it-a few must make it. Our people will enter despite the super-tight security established since the failed coup in the early days of Seldon's First Ministry." (He virtually spat the name, "Seldon," as he always did.) "We'll finally have our chance."

Now it was Andorin who felt dizzy, as if he'd fallen into a spinning vortex. "It seems odd for me to say so, Chief, but there is something to this gods business after all, because I have been waiting to tell you something that, I now see, fits in perfectly."

Namarti stared at the other suspiciously and looked about the room as though he suddenly feared a breach of security. But such fear was groundless. The room was located deep in an old-fashioned residential complex, and was well-shielded. No one could overhear and no one, even with detailed directions, could find it easily-nor get through the layers of protection provided by loyal members of the organization.

Namarti said, "What are you talking about?"

"I've found a man for you. A young man-very naive. A quite likeable fellow, the kind you feel you can trust as soon as you see him. He's got an open face, wide-open eyes; he's lived in Dahl; he's an enthusiast for equality; he thinks Joranum was the greatest thing since Mycogenian candy; and I'm sure we can easily talk him into doing anything for the cause."

"For the cause?" said Namarti, whose suspicions were not in the least alleviated. "Is he one of us?"

"Actually, he's not one of anything. He's got some vague notions in his head that Joranum wanted Sector Equality."

"That was his lure. Sure."

"It's ours, too, but the kid *believes* it. He talks equality and popular participation in government. He even mentioned democracy."

Namarti snickered. "In twenty thousand years, democracy has never been used for very long without falling apart."

"Yes, but that's not our concern. It's what drives the young man and I tell you, Chief, I knew we had our tool just about the moment I saw him, but I didn't know how we could possibly use him. Now I know. We can get him onto the Imperial Palace grounds as a

gardener."

"How? Does he know anything about gardening?"

"No, I'm sure he doesn't. He's never worked at anything but unskilled labor. He's operating a hauler right now, and I think that he had to be taught how to do that. Still, if we can get him in as a gardener's helper, if he just knows how to hold a pair of shears, then we've got it."

"Got what?"

"Got someone who can approach anyone we wish, and do so without raising the flutter of a suspicion, and get close enough to strike. I'm telling you he simply exudes a kind of honorable stupidity, a kind of foolish virtue, that inspires confidence."

"And he'll do what we tell him to do?"

"Absolutely."

"How did you meet this person?"

"It wasn't I. It was Manella who really spotted him."

"Who?"

"Manella. Manella Dubanqua."

"Oh. That friend of yours." Namarti's face twisted into a look of prissy disapproval.

"She's the friend of many people," said Andorin tolerantly. "That's one of the things that makes her so useful. She can weigh a man quickly and with very little to go on. She talked to this fellow, because he attracted her at sight, and I assure you Manella is not one to be attracted by anything other than the bottom-line, so you see this man is rather unusual. She talked to this fellow-his name is Planchet, by the way-and then told me 'I have a live one for you, Gleb.' -I'll trust her on the matter of live ones any day."

Namarti said slyly, "And what do you think this wonderful tool of yours would do once he had the run of the grounds, eh, Andorin?"

Andorin took a deep breath. "What else? If we do everything right, he will dispose of our dear Emperor, Cleon, first of that Name, for us."

Namarti's face blazed into anger. "What? Are you mad? Why should we want to kill Cleon? He's our hold on the government. He's the facade behind which we can rule. He's our passport to legitimacy. Where are your brains? We need him as a figurehead. He won't interfere with us and we'll be stronger for his existence."

Andorin's fair face turned blotchy red, and his good humor finally exploded. "What do you have in mind, then? What are you planning? I'm getting tired of always having to second-guess."

Namarti raised his hand. "All right. All right. Calm down. I meant no harm. But think a bit, will you? Who destroyed Joranum? Who destroyed our hopes ten years ago? It was that mathematician. And it

is he who rules the Empire now with his idiotic talk about Psychohistory. Cleon is nothing. It is Hari Seldon we must destroy. It is Hari Seldon whom I've been turning into an object of ridicule with these constant breakdowns. The miseries they entail are placed at *his* doorstep. It is all being interpreted as *his* inefficiency, *his* incapacity." There was a trace of spittle in the corners of Namarti's mouth. "When he's cut down there will be a cheer from the Empire that will drown out every holovision report for hours. It won't even matter if they know who did it." He raised his hand and let it drop, as if he were plunging a knife into someone's heart. "We will be looked upon as heroes of the Empire, as saviors. -Eh? Eh? Do you think your youngster can cut down Hari Seldon?"

Andorin had recovered equanimity, at least outwardly.

"I'm sure he would," he said, with forced lightness. "For Cleon, he might have some respect; the Emperor has a mystical aura about him, as you know." (He stressed the "you" faintly and Namarti scowled.) "He would have not such feelings about Seldon."

Inwardly, however, Andorin was furious. This was not what he wanted. He was being betrayed.

14.

Manella brushed the hair out of her eyes and smiled up at Raych. “I told you it needn't cost much in the way of money.”

Raych blinked and scratched at his bare shoulder. “Actually, it didn't cost me nothing-unless you ask for something now.”

She shrugged and smiled rather impishly, “Why should I?”

“Why shouldn't you?”

“Because I'm allowed to take my own pleasure sometimes.”

“With me?”

“There's no one else.”

There was a long pause and then Manella said soothingly, “Besides, you don't have much money anyway. How's the job?”

Raych said, “Ain't much, but better than nothing. Lots better. Did you tell that guy to get me one?”

Manella shook her head slowly. “You mean Gleb Andorin? I didn't tell him to do anything. I just said he might be interested in you.”

“Is he going to be annoyed because you and I-”

“Why should he? None of *his* business and none of *yours* if he does, either.”

“What's he do? I mean what does he work at?”

“I don't think he works at anything. He's got money. He's a relative of the old mayors.”

“Of Wye?”

“Right. He doesn't like the government. None of those old Mayor-people do. He says Cleon should-”

She stopped suddenly, and said, “I'm talking too much. Don't you go repeating anything I say.”

“Me? I ain't heard you say nothing at all. And I ain't going to.”

“All right.”

“But about this guy, Andorin. Is he high up in Joranumite business? Is he an important guy there?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“Don't he ever talk about that kind of stuff?”

“Not to me.”

“Oh,” said Raych, trying not to sound annoyed.

She looked at him shrewdly. “Why are you so interested?”

“I want to get in with them. I figure I'll get higher up that way. Better job. More money. You know.”

“Maybe Andorin will help you. He likes you. I know that much.”

“Could you make him like me more?”

“I can try. I don't know why he shouldn't. I like you. I like you more than I like him.”

“Thank you, Manella. I like you, too. -A lot.” He ran his hand down the side of her body and wished ardently that he could concentrate more on her and less on his task.

15.

"Gleb Andorin," said Hari Seldon wearily, rubbing his eyes.

"And who is he?" asked Dors Venabili, her mood as black as it had been every day since Raych had left.

"Until a few days ago, I never heard of him," said Seldon. "That's the trouble with trying to run a world of forty billion people. You never hear of anyone except for the few who obtrude themselves on your notice. With all the computerized information in the world, Trantor remains a planet of anonymities. We can drag up people with their serial numbers and their statistics, but *whom* do we drag up? Add twenty-five million Outer Worlds and the wonder is that the Galactic Empire has remained a working phenomenon for all these millennia. Frankly, I think it has existed only because it very largely runs itself. And now it is finally running down."

"So much for philosophizing, Hari," said Venabili. "Who is this Andorin?"

"Someone I admit I *ought* to have known about. I managed to cajole the Imperial Guard into calling up their files on him. He's a member of the Wyan mayoralty family; the most prominent member, in fact, so prominent that the I.G. has kept tabs on him. They think he has ambitions but is too much of a playboy to do anything about them."

"And is he involved with the Joranumites?"

Seldon made an uncertain gesture. "I'm under the impression that the I.G. knows nothing about the Joranumites. That means that the Joranumites don't exist, or that, if they do, they are of no importance. It may also mean that the I.G. just isn't interested. Nor is there any way in which I can force them to be interested; I'm only thankful they give me any information at all. And I am the First Minister."

"Is it possible that you're not a very good First Minister?" said Venabili dryly.

"That's more than possible. It's been generations since there's been one less suited to the job than I. But that has nothing to do with the Imperial Guard. Despite their name, they're a totally independent arm of the government. I doubt that Cleon himself knows much about them, though, in theory, they're supposed to report directly to him. Believe me, if we only knew more about the I.G. we'd be trying to stick them into our psychohistorical equations, such as they are."

"Are they on our side, at least?"

"I believe so, but I can't swear to it."

"And why are you interested in this what's-his-name?"

"Gleb Andorin. Because I received a roundabout message from

Raych."

Venabili's eyes flashed. "You didn't tell me. Is he all right?"

"As far as I know, but I hope he doesn't try any further messages. If he's caught communicating, he *won't* be all right. In any case, he has made contact with Andorin."

"And the Joranumites, too?"

"I don't think so. It would sound unlikely, for the connection is not something that would make sense. The Joranumite movement is predominantly lower-class; a proletarian movement, so to speak. And Andorin is an aristocrat of aristocrats. What would he be doing with the Joranumites?"

"If he's of the Wyan mayoralty family, he might aspire to the Imperial throne, might he not?"

"They've been aspiring for generations. You remember Rashelle, I trust. She was his aunt."

"Then he might be using the Joranumites as a stepping-stone, don't you think?"

"If they exist. And if they do, and if a stepping stone is what Andorin wants, I think he'd find himself playing a dangerous game. The Joranumites, if they exist, would have their own plans and a man like Andorin may find he's simply riding a greti-"

"What's a greti?"

"Some extinct animal of a ferocious type, I think. It's just a proverbial phrase, back on Helicon. If you ride a greti, you find you can't get off, for then it will eat you."

Seldon paused. "One more thing. Raych seems to be involved with a woman who knows Andorin and through whom, he thinks, he may get important information. I'm telling you this now so that you won't accuse me, afterward, of keeping anything from you."

Venabili frowned. "A woman?"

"One, I gather, who knows a great many men who will talk to her unwisely, sometimes, under intimate circumstances."

"One of those." Her frown deepened. "I don't like the thought of Raych-"

"Come, come. Raych is thirty years old and undoubtedly has much experience. You can leave this woman-or any woman, I think-safely to Raych's good sense." He turned toward Venabili with a look so worn, so weary, as he said, "Do you think I like this? Do you think I like any of this?"

And Venabili could find nothing to say.

16.

Gambol Deen Namarti was not, at even the best of times, noted for his politeness and suavity, and the approaching climax of a decade of planning had left him the sourer of disposition.

He rose from his chair in some agitation as he said, “You've taken your time in getting here, Andorin.”

Andorin shrugged. “But I'm here now.”

“And this young man of yours-this remarkable tool that you're touting. Where is he?”

“He'll be here eventually.”

“Why not now?”

Andorin's rather handsome head seemed to sink a bit as though, for a moment, he were lost in thought or coming to a decision, and then he said abruptly, “I don't want to bring him till I know where I stand.”

“What does that mean?”

“Simple words in Galactic Standard. How long has it been your aim to get rid of Hari Seldon?”

“Always! Always! Is that so hard to understand? We deserve revenge for what he did to JoJo. Even if he hadn't done that, since he's the First Minister, we'd have to put him out of the way.”

“But it's Cleon-*Cleon*-who must be brought down. If not only he, then at least he in addition to Seldon.”

“Why does a figurehead concern you?”

“You weren't born yesterday. I've never had to explain my part in this because you're not so ignorant a fool as not to know. What can I possibly care about your plans if they don't include a replacement on the throne?”

Namarti laughed. “Of course. I've known for a long time that you look upon me as your footstool; your way of climbing up to the Imperial throne.”

“Would you expect anything else?”

“Not at all. I will do the planning, take the chances, and then, when all is quite done, you gather in the reward. It makes sense, doesn't it?”

“Yes, it does make sense, for the reward will be yours, too. Won't you become the First Minister? Won't you be able to count on the full support of a new Emperor, one who is filled with gratitude? Won't I be” (and his face twisted with irony as he spat out the words) “the new figurehead?”

“Is that what you plan to be? A figurehead?”

“I plan to be the Emperor. I supplied money when you had none.

I supplied the cadre when you had none. I supplied the respectability you needed to build a large organization here in Wye. I can still withdraw everything I've brought in."

"I don't think so."

"Do you want to risk it? Don't think you can treat me as you treated Kaspalov, either. If anything happens to me, Wye will become uninhabitable for you and yours, and you will find that no other sector will supply you with what you need."

Namarti sighed, "Then you insist on having the Emperor killed."

"I didn't say 'killed.' I said brought down. The details I leave to you." This last was accompanied by an almost dismissive wave of the hand, a flick of the wrist, as if he were already sitting on the Imperial throne.

"And then you'll be Emperor?"

"Yes."

"No, you won't. You'll be dead-and not at my hands, either. Andorin, let me teach you some of the facts of life. If Cleon is killed, then the matter of the succession comes up and, to avoid civil war, the Imperial Guard will at once kill every member of the Wyan mayoral family they can find; you first of all. On the other hand, if only the First Minister is killed, you will be safe."

"Why?"

"A First Minister is only a First Minister. They come and go. It is possible that Cleon himself may have grown tired of him and arranged the killing. Certainly, we would see to it that rumors of this sort spread. The I.G. would hesitate and would give us a chance to put the new government into place. Indeed, it is quite possible that they would themselves be grateful for the end of Seldon."

"And with the new government in place, what am I to do? Keep on waiting? Forever?"

"No. Once I'm First Minister, there will be ways of dealing with Cleon. I may even be able to do something with the Imperial Guard and use them as my instruments. I will then manage to find some safe way of getting rid of Cleon, and replacing him with you."

Andorin burst out, "Why should you?"

Namarti said, "What do you mean, why should I?"

"You have a personal grudge against Seldon. Once he is gone, why should you run the unnecessary risks at the highest level? You will make your peace with Cleon and I will have to retire to my crumbling estate and my impossible dreams. And perhaps to play it safe, you will have me killed."

Namarti said, "No! Cleon was born to the throne. He comes from several generations of Emperors-the proud Entun dynasty. He would be very difficult to handle, a plague. You, on the other hand, would

come to the throne as a member of a new dynasty, without any strong ties to tradition, for the previous Wyan Emperors were, you will admit, totally undistinguished. You will be seated on a shaky throne and will need someone to support you-*me*. And I will need someone who is dependent upon me and whom I can therefore handle-*you*.- Come, Andorin, ours is not a marriage of love, which fades in a year; it is a marriage of convenience which can last life-long. Let us trust each other."

"You swear I will be Emperor."

"What good would swearing do if you couldn't trust my word? Let us say I would find you an extraordinarily useful Emperor, and I would want you to replace Cleon as soon as that can safely be managed. Now, introduce me to this man whom you think will be the perfect tool for your purposes."

"Very well. And remember what makes him different. I have studied him. He's a not-very-bright idealist. He will do what he's told, unconcerned by danger, unconcerned by second thoughts. And he exudes a kind of trustworthiness so that his victim will trust him even if he has a blaster in his hand."

"I find that impossible to believe."

"Wait till you meet him," said Andorin.

17.

Raych kept his eyes down. He had taken a quick look at Namarti and it was all he needed. He had met the man ten years before, when Raych had been sent to lure JoJo Joranum to his destruction, and one look was more than enough.

Namarti had changed little in ten years. Anger and hatred were still the dominant characteristics one could see in him-or that Raych could see in him, at any rate, for he realized he was not an impartial witness-and those seemed to have marinated him into leathery permanence. His face was a trifle more gaunt; his hair was flecked with gray; but his thin-lipped mouth was set in the same harsh line and his dark eyes were as brilliantly dangerous as ever.

That was enough, and Raych kept his eyes averted. Namarti, he felt, was not one of those who would take to someone who could stare him straight in the face.

Namarti seemed to devour Raych with his own eyes, but the slight sneer his face always seemed to wear remained.

He turned to Andorin, who stood uneasily to one side, and said, quite as though the subject of conversation were not present, “This is the man, then.”

Andorin nodded and his lips moved in a soundless, “Yes, Chief.”

Namarti said to Raych abruptly, “Your name.”

“Planchet, sir.”

“You believe in our cause?”

“Yes, sir.” He spoke carefully, in accordance with Andorin's instructions. “I am a democrat and want greater participation of the people in the governmental process.”

Namarti's eyes flicked in Andorin's direction. “A speech-maker.”

He looked back at Raych. “Are you willing to undertake risks for the cause?”

“Any risk, sir.”

“You will do as you are told? No questions? No hanging back?”

“I will follow orders.”

“Do you know anything about gardening?”

Raych hesitated. “No, sir.”

“You're a Trantorian, then? Born under the dome?”

“I was born in Millimaru, sir, and I was brought up in Dahl.”

“Very well,” said Namarti. Then, to Andorin. “Take him out and deliver him, temporarily, to the men waiting there. They will take good care of him. Then come back, Andorin, I want to speak to you.”

When Andorin returned, a profound change had come over Namarti. His eyes were glittering and his mouth was twisted into a

feral grin.

"Andorin," he said, "the gods we spoke of the other day are with us to an extent I couldn't have imagined."

"I told you the man was suitable for our purposes."

"Far more suitable than you think. You know, of course, the tale of how Hari Seldon-our revered First Minister-sent his son, or foster-son, rather, to see Joranum, and to set the trap into which Joranum, against my advice, fell."

"Yes," said Andorin, nodding wearily, "I know the story." He said it with the air of one who knew the story entirely too well.

"I saw that boy only that once, but his face is burned into my brain. Do you suppose that ten years' passage, and false heels, and a shaved mustache could fool me? That Planchet of yours is Raych, the foster-son of Hari Seldon."

Andorin paled and, for a moment, he held his breath. He said, "Are you sure of that, Chief?"

"As sure as I am that you're standing here in front of me and that you have introduced an enemy into our midst."

"I had no idea-"

"Don't get nervous," said Namarti. "I consider it the best thing you have ever done in your idle, aristocratic life. You have played the role that the gods have marked out for you. If I had not known who he was, he might have fulfilled the function for which he was undoubtedly intended, to be a spy in our midst and an informant of our most secret plans. But since I know who he is, it won't work that way. Instead, we now have *everything*." Namarti rubbed his hands together in delight and, haltingly, as if he realized how far out of character for him it was, he smiled-and laughed.

18.

Manella said thoughtfully, “I guess I won't be seeing you anymore, Planchet.”

Raych was drying himself after his shower. “Why not?”

“Gleb Andorin doesn't want me to.”

“Why not?”

Manella shrugged her smooth shoulders. “He says you have important work to do and no more time to fool around. Maybe he means you'll get a better job.”

Raych stiffened. “What kind of work? Did he mention anything in particular?”

“No, but he said he would be going to the Imperial sector.”

“Did he? Does he often tell you things like that?”

“You know how it is, Planchet. When a fellow's in bed with you, he talks a lot.”

“I know,” said Raych, who was himself careful not to. “What else does he say?”

“Why do you ask?” She frowned a bit. “He always asks about you, too. I noticed that about men. They're curious about each other. Why is that, do you suppose?”

“What do you tell him about me?”

“Not much. Just you're a nice kid and you're a very decent sort. Naturally, I don't tell him I like you better than I like him. That would hurt his feelings-and it might hurt me, too.”

Raych was getting dressed. “So it's good-bye, then.”

“For a while, I suppose. Gleb may change his mind. Of course, I'd like to go to the Imperial sector, if he'd take me. I've never been there.”

Raych almost slipped, but he managed to cough, then said, “I've never been there, either.”

“It's got the biggest buildings and the nicest places and the fanciest restaurants, and that's where the rich people live. I'd like to meet some rich people.”

Raych said, “I suppose there's not much to be gotten out of a person like me.”

“You're all right. You can't think of money all the time, but, by the same token, you've got to think of it some of the time. Especially since I think Gleb is getting tired of me.”

Raych felt compelled to say, “No one could get tired of you,” and then found, a little to his own confusion, that he meant it.

Manella said, “That's what men always say, but you'd be surprised. Anyway, it's been good, you and I, Planchet. Take care of

yourself and, who knows, we may see each other again."

Raych nodded and found himself at a loss for words. There was no way in which he could say or do anything to express his feelings.

With a wrench, he turned his mind in other directions. He had to find out what the Namarti people were planning. If they were separating him from Manella, the crisis must be rapidly approaching. All he had to go on was that queer question about gardening.

Nor could he get any further information back to Seldon. He had been kept under close scrutiny since his meeting with Namarti; and all avenues of communication were cut off-surely another indication of an approaching crisis.

But if he were to find out what was going on only after it was done, and if he could communicate the news only after it was no longer news, he would have failed.

19.

Hari Seldon was not having a good day. He had not heard from Raych since his first communique; he had no idea what was happening.

Aside from his natural concern for Raych's safety (surely he would hear if something really bad had happened) there was his uneasiness over what might be planned.

It would have to be subtle. A direct attack on the Palace itself was totally out of the question. Security there was far too tight. But if so, what else could be planned that would be sufficiently effective?

The whole thing was keeping him awake at night and distracted by day.

The signal-light flashed.

"First Minister. Your two o'clock appointment, sir-"

"What two o'clock appointment is this?"

"The gardener, Mandell Gruber. He has the necessary certification."

Seldon remembered. "Yes. Send him in."

This was no time to see Gruber, but he had agreed to it in a moment of weakness-the man had seemed distraught. A First Minister should not have moments of weakness, but Seldon had been Seldon long before he had become First Minister.

"Come in, Gruber," he said, kindly.

Gruber stood before him, head ducking mechanically, eyes darting this way and that. Seldon was quite certain the gardener had never been in any room as magnificent as this one, and he had the bitter urge to say: Do you like it? Please take it. *I* don't want it.

But he only said, "What is it, Gruber? Why are you so unhappy?"

There was no immediate answer; Gruber merely smiled vacantly.

Seldon said, "Sit down, man. Right there in that chair."

"Oh, no, First Minister. It would not be fitting. I'll get it dirty."

"If you do, it will be easy to clean. Do as I say. -Good! Now just sit there a minute or two and gather your thoughts. Then, when you are ready, tell me what's the matter."

Gruber sat silent for a moment, then the words came out in a panting rush. "First Minister. It is Chief Gardener I am to be. The blessed Emperor himself told me so."

"Yes, I have heard of that, but that surely isn't what is troubling you. Your new post is a matter of congratulations and I do congratulate you. I may even have contributed to it, Gruber. I have never forgotten your bravery at the time they tried to kill me, and you can be sure I mentioned it to His Imperial Majesty. It is a suitable

reward, Gruber, and you would deserve the promotion in any case for it is quite clear from your record that you are fully qualified for the post. So now that that's out of the way, tell me what is troubling you."

"First Minister, it is the very post and promotion that is troubling me. It is something I cannot manage for I am not qualified."

"We are convinced you are."

Gruber grew agitated. "And is it in an office I will have to sit? I can't sit in an office. I could not go out in the open air and work with the plants and animals. I would be in prison, First Minister."

Seldon's eyes opened wide. "No such thing, Gruber. You needn't stay in the office longer than you have to. You could wander about the grounds freely, supervising everything. You will have all the outdoors you want and you will merely spare yourself the hard work."

"I want the hard work, First Minister, and it's no chance at all they will let me come out of the office. I have watched the present Chief Gardener. He couldn't leave his office, though he wanted to ever so. There is too much administration, too much bookkeeping. Sure, if he wants to know what is going on, we must go to his office to tell him. He watches things on holovision" (this, with infinite contempt) "as though you can tell anything about growing, living things from images. It is not for me, First Minister."

"Come, Gruber, be a man. It's not all that bad. You'll get used to it. You'll work your way in slowly."

Gruber shook his head. "First off-at the very first-I will have to deal with the new gardeners. I'll be buried." Then, with sudden energy, "It is a job I do not want and must not have, First Minister."

"Right now, Gruber, perhaps you don't want the job, but you are not alone. I'll tell you that right now I wish I were not First Minister. This job is too much for me. I even have a notion that there are times when the Emperor himself is tired of his Imperial robes. We're all in this galaxy to do our work, and the work isn't always pleasant."

"I understand that, First Minister, but the Emperor must be Emperor, for he was born to that. And you must be First Minister for there is no one else who can do the job. But in my case, it is just Chief Gardener we are ruminating upon. There are fifty gardeners in the place who could do it as well as I could and who wouldn't mind the office. You say that you spoke to the Emperor about how I tried to help you. Can't you speak to him again, and explain that if he wants to reward me for what I did, he can leave me as I am?"

Seldon leaned back in his chair and said solemnly, "Gruber, I would do that for you if I could, but I've got to explain something to you and I can only hope that you will understand it. The Emperor, in theory, is absolute ruler of the Empire. In actual fact, there is very little he can do. I run the Empire. I run the Empire right now much

more than he does and there is very little I can do, too. There are millions and billions of people at all levels of government, all making decisions, all making mistakes, some acting wisely and heroically, some acting foolishly and thievishly. There's no controlling them. Do you understand me, Gruber?"

"I do, but what has this to do with my case?"

"Because there is only one place where the Emperor is really absolute ruler, and that is over the Imperial grounds themselves. Here his word is law and the layers of officials beneath him are few enough for him to handle. For him to be asked to rescind a decision he has made in connection with the Imperial Palace grounds would be to invade the only area which he would consider inviolate. If I were to say, 'Take back your decision on Gruber, Your Imperial Majesty' he would be much more likely to relieve me of my duties than to take back his decision. That might be a good thing for me, but it wouldn't help you any."

Gruber said, "Does that mean there's no way things can be changed?"

"That's exactly what it means. But don't worry, Gruber, I'll help you all I can. I'm sorry. But now I have really spent all the time on you that I am able to spare."

Gruber rose to his feet. In his hands he twisted his green gardening cap. There was more than a suspicion of tears in his eyes. "Thank you, First Minister. I know you would like to help. You're-you're a good man, First Minister."

He turned and left, sorrowing.

Seldon looked after him thoughtfully, and shook his head. Multiply Gruber's woes by a quadrillion and you would have the woes of all the people of the twenty-five million worlds of the Empire, and how was he, Seldon, to work out salvation for all of them, when he was helpless to solve the problem of one single man who had come to him for help?

Psychohistory could not save one man. Could it save a quadrillion?

He shook his head again, and checked the nature and time of his next appointment, and then, suddenly, he stiffened. He shouted into his communications wire in sudden wild abandon, quite unlike his usually strict control. "Get that gardener back. Get him back right now."

20.

“What's this about new gardeners?” exclaimed Seldon. This time, he did not ask Gruber to sit down.

Gruber's eyes blinked rapidly. He was in a panic at having been recalled so unexpectedly. “New gardeners?” he stammered.

“You said ‘all the new gardeners.’ Those were your words. What new gardeners?”

Gruber was astonished. “Sure, if there is a new Chief Gardener, there will be new gardeners. It is the custom.”

“I have never heard of this.”

“The last time we had a change of Chief Gardeners, you were not First Minister. It is likely you were not even on Trantor.”

“But what's it all about?”

“Well, gardeners are never discharged. Some die. Some grow too old and are pensioned off and replaced. Still, by the time a new Chief Gardener is ready for his duties, at least half the staff is aged and beyond their best years. They are all pensioned off, generously, and new gardeners are brought in.”

“For youth.”

“Partly, and partly because by that time there are usually new plans for the gardens, and it is new ideas and new schemes we must have. There are almost five hundred square kilometers in the gardens and parklands, and it usually takes some years to reorganize it, and it is myself who will have to supervise it all. Please, First Minister,” Gruber was gasping. “Surely, a clever man like your own self can find a way to change the blessed Emperor's mind.”

Seldon paid no attention. His forehead was creased in concentration.

“Where do the new gardeners come from?”

“There are examinations on all the worlds-there are always people waiting to serve as replacements. They'll be coming in by the hundreds in a dozen batches. It will take me a year, at the least-”

“From where do they come? From where?”

“From any of a million worlds. We want a variety of horticultural knowledge. Any citizen of the Empire can qualify.”

“From Trantor, too?”

“No, not from Trantor. There is no one from Trantor in the gardens.” His voice grew contemptuous. “You can't get a gardener out of Trantor. The parks they have here under the dome aren't gardens. They are potted plants, and the animals are in cages. Trantorians, poor specimens that they are, know nothing about open air, free water, and the true balance of nature.”

“All right, Gruber. I will now give you a job. It will be up to you to get me the names of every new gardener scheduled to arrive over the coming weeks. Everything about them. Name. World. Identification number. Education. Experience. Everything. I want it here on my desk just as quickly as possible. I'm going to send people to help you. People with machines. What kind of a computer do you use?”

“Only a simple one for keeping track of plantings and species and things like that.”

“All right. The people I send will be able to do anything you can't do. I can't tell you how important this is.”

“If I should do this-”

“Gruber, this is not the time to make bargains. Fail me, and you will not be Chief Gardener. Instead, you will be discharged without a pension.”

Alone again, he barked into his communications wire, “Cancel all appointments for the rest of the afternoon.”

He then let his body flop in his chair, feeling every bit of his fifty years, and more, feeling his headache worsen. For years, for decades, security had been built about the Imperial Palace grounds, thicker, more solid, more impenetrable, as each new layer and each new device was added.

– And every once in a while, hordes of strangers were let into the grounds. No questions asked, probably, but one: Can you garden?

The stupidity involved was too colossal to grasp.

And he had barely caught it in time. Or had he? Was he, even now, too late?

21.

Gleb Andorin gazed at Namarti through half-closed eyes. He had never liked the man, but there were times when he liked him less than he usually did, and this was one of those times. Why should Andorin, a Wyan of royal birth (that's what it amounted to, after all), have to work with this parvenu, this near-psychotic paranoid?

Andorin knew why, and he had to endure, even when Namarti was once again in the process of telling the story of how he had built up the Party during a period of ten years to its present pitch of perfection. Did he tell this to everyone, over and over? Or was it just Andorin who was his chosen vessel for the receipt of it?

Namarti's face seemed to shine with glee as he said in an odd sing-song, as though it were a matter of rote, "-so year after year, I worked on those lines, even through hopelessness and uselessness, building an organization, chipping away at confidence in the government, creating and intensifying dissatisfaction. When there was the banking crisis and the week of the moratorium, I-"

He paused suddenly. "I've told you this many times, and you're sick of hearing it, aren't you?"

Andorin's lips twitched in a brief, dry smile. Namarti was not such an idiot as not to know the bore he was; he just couldn't help it. Andorin said, "You've told me this many times." He allowed the remainder of the question to hang in the air unanswered. The answer, after all, was an obvious affirmative. There was no need to face him with it.

A slight flush crossed Namarti's sallow face. He said, "But it could have gone on forever, the building, the chipping, without ever coming to a point, if I hadn't had the proper tool in my hands. And without any effort on my part, the tool came to me."

"The gods brought you Planchet," said Andorin neutrally.

"You're right. There will be a group of gardeners entering the Imperial Palace grounds soon." He paused and seemed to savor the thought. "Men and women. Enough to serve as a mask for the handful of our operatives who will accompany them. Among them will be you-and Planchet. And what will make you and Planchet unusual is that you will be carrying blasters."

"Surely," said Andorin, with deliberate malice behind a polite expression, "we'll be stopped at the gates and held for questioning. Bringing an illicit blaster onto the Palace grounds-"

"You won't be stopped," said Namarti, missing the malice. "You won't be searched. That's been arranged. You will all be greeted as a matter of course by some Palace official. I don't know who would

ordinarily be in charge of that task-the Third Assistant Chamberlain in Charge of Grass and Leaves, for all I know, but in this case, it will be Seldon himself. The great mathematician will hurry out to greet the new gardeners and welcome them to the grounds."

"You're sure of that, I suppose."

"Of course I am. It's all been arranged. He will learn, at more or less the last minute, that his son is among those listed as new gardeners, and it will be impossible for him to refrain from coming out to see him. And when Seldon appears, Planchet will raise his blaster. Our people will raise the cry of 'Treason.' In the confusion and hurly-burly, Planchet will kill Seldon, and you will kill Planchet. You will then drop your blaster and leave. There are those who will help you leave. It's been arranged."

"Is it absolutely necessary to kill Planchet?"

Namarti frowned. "Why? Do you object to one killing and not to another? When Planchet recovers, do you wish him to tell the authorities all he knows about us? Besides, this is a family feud we are arranging. Don't forget that Planchet is, in actual fact, Raych Seldon. It will look as though the two had fired simultaneously at each other, or as though Seldon had given orders that if his son made any hostile move, he was to be shot down. We will see to it that the family angle will be given full publicity. It will be reminiscent of the bad old days of the Bloody Emperor Manowell. The people of Trantor will surely be repelled by the sheer wickedness of the deed. That, piled on top of all the inefficiencies and breakdowns they've been witnessing and living through, will raise the cry for a new government, and no one will be able to refuse them, least of all the Emperor. And then we'll step in."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. I don't live in a dream world. There is likely to be some interim government, but it will fail. We'll see to it that it fails, and we'll come out in the open and revive the old Joranumite arguments that the Trantorians have never forgotten. And in time, in not too much time, I will be First Minister."

"And I?"

"Will eventually be the Emperor."

Andorin said, "The chance of all this working is small. -This is arranged. That is arranged. The other thing is arranged. All of it has to come together and mesh perfectly, or it will fail. Somewhere, someone is bound to mess up. It's an unacceptable risk."

"Unacceptable? For whom? For you?"

"Certainly. You expect me to make certain that Planchet will kill his father and you expect me then to kill Planchet. Why me? Aren't there tools worth less than I who might more easily be risked?"

"Yes, but to choose anyone else would make failure certain. Who

but you has so much riding on this mission that there is no chance you will turn back in a fit of vapors at the last minute?"

"The risk is enormous."

"Isn't it worth it to you? You're playing for the Imperial throne."

"And what risk are you taking, Chief? You will remain here, quite comfortable, and wait to hear the news."

Namarti's lip curled. "What a fool you are, Andorin! What an Emperor you will make! Do you suppose I take no risk because I will be here? If the gambit fails, if the plot miscarries, if some of our people are taken, do you think they won't tell everything they know? If you were somehow caught, would you face the tender treatment of the Imperial Guard without ever telling them about me?

"And with a failed assassination attempt at hand, do you suppose they won't comb Trantor to find me? Do you suppose that in the end they will fail to find me? And when they do find me, what do you suppose I will have to face at their hands? -Risk? I run a worse risk than any of you, just sitting here doing nothing. It boils down to this, Andorin. Do you, or do you not, wish to be Emperor?"

Andorin said in a low voice, "I wish to be Emperor."

And so things were set in motion.

22.

Raych had no trouble seeing that he was being treated with special care. The whole group of would-be gardeners were now quartered in one of the hotels in the Imperial Sector, although not one of the prime hotels, of course.

They were an odd lot, from fifty different worlds, but Raych had little chance to speak to any of them. Andorin, without being too obvious about it, kept him apart from the others.

Raych wondered why. It depressed him. In fact, he had been feeling somewhat depressed since he had left Wye. It interfered with his thinking process and he fought it, but not with entire success.

Andorin was himself wearing rough clothes and was attempting to look like a workman. He would be playing the part of a gardener as a way of running the show-whatever the show might be.

Raych felt ashamed that he hadn't even had the chance to warn his father. They might be doing this for every Trantorian who had been pushed into the group, for all he knew, just as an extreme precaution. Raych estimated that there might be a dozen Trantorians among them, all of them Namarti's people, of course, men and women both.

What puzzled him was that Andorin treated him with what was almost affection. He monopolized him, insisted on having all his meals with him, treated him quite differently from the way in which he treated anyone else.

Could it be because they had shared Manella? Raych did not know enough about the mores of the Sector of Wye to be able to tell whether there might not be a polyandrish touch to their society. If two men shared a woman, did that make them in a way fraternal? Did it create a bond?

Raych had never heard of such a thing, but he knew better than to suppose he had a grasp of even a tiny fraction of the infinite subtleties of galactic societies, even of Trantorian societies.

But now that his mind had brought him back to Manella, he dwelled on her for a while. He missed her terribly, and it occurred to him that that might be the cause of his depression, though, to tell the truth, what he was feeling now, as he was finishing lunch with Andorin, was almost despair-though he could think of no cause for it.

Manella!

She had said she wanted to visit the Imperial Sector and, presumably, she could wheedle Andorin to her liking. He was desperate enough to ask a foolish question. “Mr. Andorin, I keep wondering if maybe you brought Ms. Dubanqua along with you, here

to the Imperial Sector."

Andorin looked utterly astonished. Then he laughed gently. "Manella? Do you see her doing any gardening? Or even pretending she could? No, no, Manella is one of those women invented for our quiet moments. She has no function at all, otherwise." Then, "Why do you ask, Planchet?"

Raych shrugged. "I don't know. It's sort of dull around here. I sort of thought-" His voice trailed away.

Andorin watched him carefully. Finally, he said, "Surely, you're not of the opinion that it matters much which woman you are involved with? I assure you it doesn't matter to her which man she's involved with. Once this is over, there will be other women. Plenty of them."

"When will this be over?"

"Soon. And you're going to be part of it in a very important way." Andorin watched Raych narrowly.

Raych said, "How important? Aren't I gonna be just-a gardener?" His voice sounded hollow, and he found himself unable to put a spark in it.

"You'll be more than that, Planchet. You'll be going in with a blaster."

"With a what?"

"A blaster."

"I never held a blaster. Not in my whole life."

"There's nothing to it. You lift it. You point it. You close the contact, and someone dies."

"I can't kill anyone."

"I thought you were one of us; that you would do anything for the cause."

"I didn't mean-kill." Raych couldn't seem to collect his thoughts. Why must he kill? What did they really have in mind for him? And how would he be able to alert the Palace guards before the killing would be carried out?

Andorin's face hardened suddenly; an instant conversion from friendly interest to stern decision. He said, "You must kill."

Raych gathered all his strength. "No. I ain't gonna kill nobody. That's final."

Andorin said, "Planchet, you will do as you are told."

"Not murder."

"Even murder."

"How you gonna make me?"

"I shall simply tell you to."

Raych felt dizzy. What made Andorin so confident?

He shook his head. "No."

Andorin said, “We've been feeding you, Planchet, ever since you left Wye. I made sure you ate with me. I supervised your diet. Especially the meal you've just eaten.”

Raych felt the horror rise within him. He suddenly understood. “Desperance!”

“Exactly,” said Andorin. “You're a sharp devil, Planchet.”

“It's illegal.”

“Yes, of course. So's murder.”

Raych knew about desperance. It was a chemical modification of a perfectly harmless tranquilizer. The modified form, however, did not produce tranquillity, but despair. It had been outlawed because of its use in mind control, though there were persistent rumors that the Imperial Guard used it.

Andorin said, as though it were not hard to read Raych's mind, “It's called desperance because that's an old word meaning ‘hopelessness.’ I think you're feeling hopeless.”

“Never,” whispered Raych.

“Very resolute of you, but you can't fight the chemical. And the more hopeless you feel, the more effective the drug.”

“No chance.”

“Think about it, Planchet. Namarti recognized you at once, even without your mustache. He knows you are Raych Seldon, and, at my direction, you are going to kill your father.”

Raych muttered, “Not before I kill you.”

He rose from his chair. There should be no problem at all in this. Andorin might be taller, but he was slender and, clearly, no athlete. Raych would break him in two with one arm-but he swayed as he rose. He shook his head, but it wouldn't clear.

Andorin rose, too, and backed away. He drew his right hand from where it had been resting within his left sleeve. He was holding a weapon.

He said pleasantly, “I came prepared. I have been informed of your prowess as a Heliconian Twister and there will be no hand-to-hand combat.”

He looked down at his weapon. “This is not a blaster,” he said. “I can't afford to have you killed before you accomplish your task. It's a neuronic whip. Much worse in a way. I will aim at your left shoulder and, believe me, the pain will be so excruciating that the world's greatest stoic would not be able to endure it.”

Raych, who had been advancing slowly and grimly, stopped abruptly. He had been twelve years old when he had had a taste-a small one-of a neuronic whip. Once struck, no one ever forgot the pain, however long he lived, however full of incidents his life.

Andorin said, “Moreover, I will use full strength so that the nerves

in your upper arms will be stimulated first into unbearable pain and then damaged into uselessness. You will never use your left arm again. I will spare the right so you can handle the blaster. -Now if you sit down and accept matters, as you must, you may keep both arms. Of course, you must eat again so your desperance level increases. Your situation will only worsen."

Raych felt the drug-induced despair settle over him, and the despair served, in itself, to deepen the effect. His vision was turning double, and he could think of nothing to say.

He knew only that he would have to do what Andorin would tell him to do. He had played the game, and he had lost.

23.

"No!" Hari Seldon was almost violent. "I don't want you out there, Dors."

Venabili stared back at him, with an expression as firm as his own. "Then I won't let you go either, Hari."

"I must be there."

"It is not your place. It is the First Gardener who must greet these new people."

"So it is. But Gruber can't do it. He's a broken man."

"He must have a deputy of some sort, an assistant. Let the old Chief Gardener do it. He holds the office till the end of the year."

"The old Chief Gardener is too ill. Besides," Seldon hesitated, "there are ringers among the gardeners. Trantorians. They're here for some reason. I have the names of every one of them."

"Have them taken into custody, then. Every last one of them. It's simple. Why are you making it so complex?"

"Because we don't know why they're here. Something's up. I don't see what twelve gardeners can do, but- No, let me rephrase that. I can see a dozen things they can do, but I don't know which one of those things they plan. We will indeed take them into custody, but I must know more about everything before it's done.

"We have to know enough to winkle out everyone in the conspiracy from top to bottom, and we must know enough of what they're doing to be able to make the proper punishment stick. I don't want to get twelve men and women on what is essentially a misdemeanor charge. They'll plead desperation; the need for a job. They'll complain it isn't fair for Trantorians to be excluded. They'll get plenty of sympathy and we'll be left looking like fools. We must give them a chance to convict themselves of more than that. Besides-"

There was a long pause and Venabili said wrathfully, "Well, what's the new 'besides'?"

Seldon's voice lowered. "One of the twelve is Raych, using the alias Planchet."

"What?"

"Why are you surprised? I sent him to Wye to infiltrate the Joranumite movement and he's succeeded in infiltrating something. I have every faith in him. If he's there, he knows why he's there, and he must have some sort of plan to put a spoke in the wheel. But I want to be there, too. I want to see him. I want to be in a position to help if I can."

"If you want to help him, have fifty Guards of the Palace standing shoulder to shoulder on either side of your gardeners."

“No. Again, we'll end up with nothing. Security will be in place, but not in evidence. The gardeners in question must think they have a clear hand to do whatever it is they plan to do. Before they can do so, but after they have made it quite plain what they intend-we'll have them.”

“That's risky. It's risky for Raych.”

“Risks are something we have to take. There's more riding on this than individual lives.”

“That is a heartless thing to say.”

“You think I have no heart? Even if it broke, my concern would have to be with Psycho-”

“Don't say it.” She turned away as if in pain.

“I understand,” said Seldon, “but you mustn't be there. Your presence would be so inappropriate that the conspirators will suspect we know too much and will abort their plan. I don't want their plan aborted.”

He paused, then said softly, “Dors, you say your job is to protect *me*. That comes before protecting Raych and you know that. I wouldn't insist on it, but to protect me is to protect Psychohistory and the entire human species. That must come first. What I have of Psychohistory tells me that I, in turn, must protect the center at all costs, and that is what I am trying to do. -Do you understand?”

Venabili said, “I understand,” and turned away from him.

Seldon thought: And I hope I'm right.

If he weren't, she would never forgive him. Far worse, he would never forgive himself. Psychohistory or not.

24.

They were lined up beautifully, feet spread apart, hands behind their backs, every one in a natty green uniform, loosely-fitted and with wide pockets. There was very little gender differential and one could only guess that some of the shorter ones were women. The hoods covered whatever hair they had, but then, gardeners were supposed to clip their hair quite short, either sex, and there could be no facial hair.

Why that should be, one couldn't say. The word “tradition” covered it all, as it covered so many things, some useful, some foolish.

Facing them was Mandell Gruber, flanked on either side by a deputy. Gruber was trembling, his wide-open eyes glazed.

Hari Seldon's lips tightened. If Gruber could but manage to say, “The Emperor's Gardeners greet you all,” that would be enough. Seldon himself would then take over.

His eyes swept over the new contingent and he located Raych.

His heart jumped a bit. It was the mustacheless Raych in the front row, standing more rigid than the rest, staring straight ahead. His eyes did not move to meet Seldon's; he showed no sign of recognition, however subtle.

Good, thought Seldon. He's not supposed to. He's giving nothing away.

Gruber muttered a weak welcome and Seldon jumped in.

He advanced with an easy stride, putting himself immediately before Gruber and said, “Thank you, Acting First Gardener. Men and women, Gardeners of the Emperor, you are to undertake an important task. You will be responsible for the beauty and health of the only open land on our great world of Trantor, capital of the Galactic Empire. You will see to it that if we don't have the endless vistas of open, undomed worlds, we will have a small jewel here that will outshine anything else in the Empire.

“You will all be under Mandell Gruber, who will shortly become First Gardener. He will report to me, when necessary, and I will report to the Emperor. This means, as you can all see, that you will be only three levels removed from the Imperial presence, and you will always be under his benign watch. I am certain that even now he is surveying us from the Small Palace, his personal home, which is the building you see to the right-the one with the opal-layered dome-and that he is pleased with what he sees.

“Before you start work, of course, you will all undertake a course of training that will make you entirely familiar with the grounds and their needs. You will-”

He had by this time, moved, almost stealthily, to a point directly in front of Raych, who still remained motionless, unblinking.

Seldon tried not to look unnaturally benign and then a slight frown crossed his face. The person directly behind Raych looked familiar. He might have gone unrecognized if Seldon had not studied his hologram. Wasn't that Gleb Andorin of Wye? Raych's patron in Wye, in fact? What was he doing here?

Andorin must have noticed Seldon's sudden regard, for he muttered something between scarcely opened lips and Raych's right arm, moving forward from behind his back, plucked a blaster out of the wide pocket of his green doublet. So did Andorin.

Seldon felt himself going into near-shock. How could blasters have been allowed onto the grounds? Confused, he barely heard the cries of “Treason” and the sudden noise of running and shouting.

All that really occupied Seldon's mind was Raych's blaster pointing directly at him, and Raych looking at him without any sign of recognition. Seldon's mind filled with horror as he realized that his son was going to shoot, and that he himself was only seconds from death.

25.

A blaster, despite its name, does not “blast” in the proper sense of the term. It vaporizes and blows out an interior and, if anything, causes an implosion. There is a soft, sighing sound, leaving what appears to be a “blasted” object.

Hari Seldon did not expect to hear that sound. He expected only death. It was, therefore, with surprise that he heard the distinctive soft, sighing sound, and he blinked rapidly as he looked down at himself, slack-jawed.

He was alive? (He thought it as a question, not a statement.)

Raych was still standing there, his blaster pointing forward, his eyes glazed. He was absolutely motionless as though some motive power had ceased.

Behind him was the crumpled body of Andorin, fallen in a pool of blood, and standing next to him, blaster in hand, was a gardener. The hood had slipped away; the gardener was clearly a woman with freshly clipped hair.

She allowed herself a glance at Seldon and said, “Your son knows me as Manella Dubanqua. I'm Imperial Guard. Do you want my identification, First Minister?”

“No,” said Seldon faintly. Security personnel had converged on the scene. “My son! What's wrong with my son?”

“Desperance, I think,” said Manella. “That can be washed out eventually.” She reached forward to take the blaster out of Raych's hand. “I'm sorry I didn't act sooner. I had to wait for an overt move and, when it came, it almost caught me napping.”

“I had the same trouble. We must take Raych to the Palace hospital.”

A confused noise suddenly emanated from the Small Palace. It occurred to Seldon that the Emperor was indeed watching the proceedings and, if so, he must be grandly furious indeed.

“Take care of my son, Ms. Dubanqua,” said Seldon. “I must see the Emperor.”

He set off at an undignified run through the chaos on the Great Lawns, and dashed into the Small Palace without ceremony. Cleon could scarcely grow any angrier over that.

And there, with an appalled group watching in stupor-there, on the semi-circular stairway, was the body of His Imperial Majesty, Cleon I, smashed all but beyond recognition. His rich Imperial robes now served as a shroud. Cowering against the wall, staring stupidly at the horrified faces surrounding him, was Mandell Gruber.

Seldon felt he could take no more. He took in the blaster lying at

Gruber's feet. It had been Andorin's, he was sure. He asked softly, “Gruber, what have you done?”

Gruber, staring at him, babbled, “Everyone screaming and yelling. I thought, who would know? They would think someone else had killed the Emperor. But then I couldn't run.”

“But Gruber. Why?”

“So I wouldn't have to be First Gardener.” And he collapsed.

Seldon stared in shock at the unconscious Gruber.

Everything had worked out by the narrowest of margins. He himself was alive. Raych was alive. Andorin was dead and the Joranumite conspiracy would now be hunted down to the last person.

The center would have held, just as Psychohistory had dictated.

And then one man, for a reason so trivial as to defy analysis, had killed the Emperor.

And now, thought Seldon in despair, what do we do? What happens?